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WHITEHALL'S STRATEGIC DEFICIT AND ITS THREAT TO OVERSEAS OPERATIONS

My lords, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to be invited back by the Global Strategy Forum for the third time. This time for the first time I have chosen the topic – strategy and Whitehall's inability to do it, something that has been bothering me since 2000 when I began to work either in or directly for Whitehall. Hence the first part of the title of today's talk, "Whitehall's Strategic Deficit".

In the autumn I hoped that this topic might be of some general interest. But the importance of this topic has only grown since then. Events in Algeria and Mali have prompted our Prime Minister to commit the UK to a 'generational struggle' in North Africa and to the deployment of 350 troops there to assist the French. Commenting on this latest deployment, Philip Stephens of the FT observed that it was easy to deploy troops to the African crisis, but asked 'where is the strategy?'

If my experience of the last 13 years is anything to go by, that is an easy one to answer – there isn't one.

The reason there isn't one is very simple: Whitehall doesn't do strategy.
And I believe that it is Whitehall's inability to do strategy, particularly overseas, that undermines its ability to achieve its desired effect. Hence the second part of the title, "Its threat to overseas operations".

Not only does Whitehall not do strategy, Whitehall can't even agree what strategy is.

Just after the last election, the Parliamentary Public Administration Select Committee did an investigation into Whitehall's Grand Strategy. Bernard Jenkin, the Chairman, asked every attendee for their definition of strategy and got almost as many different answers as he had interviewees. The lack of agreement on terminology undermined the subsequent interviews.
I recall particularly the inability of Jenkin to confront the FS with the incoherence of an ambition to retain global influence in times of rising challenge with fewer resources. For the FS was using strategy to mean policy; Jenkin had in mind something altogether wider; and the two talked past each other.
As George Orwell wrote in Politics and the English Language, "if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought". Without clarity about language, clarity of thought is impossible and misunderstandings encouraged.

I should note at this stage that I am absolutely not accusing the FS of deliberate cunning or evasion. I still think that our public services attract a disproportionate amount of talent to their ranks; we are lucky in the UK with our political class. The problem is that they are ill-equipped by experience or training for the executive role demanded of them. So there is a skills gap.

And then there is the structural problem: Whitehall is set up for departmental delivery of departmental responses; it has to bend itself out of shape to do cross-Whitehall governmental responses, precisely the responses that the original NSS in 2008 said would be the norm if UK was to meet future security challenges. And in the absence of any cross-Whitehall doctrine or executive methodology, Whitehall pretty much makes it up as it goes along. It is this absence of sound methodology and precise language that makes fools of us all.

But, you will protest, Whitehall has the reputation of being one of the most joined-up capitals in the western world. And the frightening thing is that I would agree with that. Whitehall achieves what it does due to the quality of the people, their innate pragmatism and service culture, and the physical construction of Whitehall, described by a previous CDS, General Walker, as 'a street designed to run an Empire'.

And indeed the executive picture of Whitehall has some very bright spots, such as its ability to handle CT incidents. Whitehall handles CT incidents better than any other capital I have seen, Washington and Paris in particular. The handling of the 7/7 crisis was as good as you will get for an incident such as that, drawing on a long tradition of excellence in this area. But the Whitehall domestic security world works so well for a number of reasons largely peculiar to itself:

- its personnel are practitioners as well as policy experts, and they bring their executive training with them;

- the Command and control is well established and exercised;
- those involved are used to working together and have compatible and well understood cultures and methodologies;
- and they have an executive attitude to risk, used to taking decisions in conditions of uncertainty to get ahead of events.

These qualities are more or less lacking across the rest of Whitehall.

Jack Straw as Home Secretary was so impressed by what he saw of this CT system in COBR during the Spring 2000 Afghan hostage crisis that when, in September 2000, the Fuel Protest required his handling, he re-convened COBR – and was dismayed it didn't work. Policy experts from across Whitehall were thrust into an executive environment they had no training for or experience of; and the pace of the three-day crisis outstripped the ability of Whitehall to create coordination or to react to events, let alone get ahead of them. The fuel protest was not won by Whitehall, it was lost by the protesters who unwittingly had chosen the nuclear option. They had no intermediary negotiating postures and, faced with imminent national breakdown including deaths in hospitals for which they would be held responsible, they took their finger off the button.

Worse was to follow in the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis of 2001, which overfaced the ability of Whitehall to coordinate the national response to the crisis. Whitehall recognised its executive failing and called in 101 Logistic Brigade Headquarters to coordinate the government's efforts from MAFF. And this they did, filling the executive deficit of Whitehall by applying a language, methodology and discipline across departmental activity. So alien was this to some that, according to one civilian participant I spoke to, the key to successful execution appeared to be to make sure everyone turned up five minutes early for a brief, make a map bird-table around which everyone gathered and make everyone stand up during briefs. If only life was that simple!

Meanwhile, inside COBR, at the start of one morning of particular crisis, the minister looked plaintively at the assembled officials and declared, "I'm sorry, you are looking to me for leadership, but I am completely untrained for this role." The minister could well have been speaking for increasing numbers of politicians whose experience is increasingly political and hence decreasingly executive. Yet power and leadership are notoriously complex to master; that takes training and experience. Politicians increasingly share their civil servants' lack of either.

All of which suggests structural, methodological and training shortfalls in the Whitehall system Cameron has inherited from Blair.

And while he has chosen to adopt the language of Blair in committing us to a generational struggle in N Africa, he might be well advised to adapt Blair's machinery of government if he wants greater success in his foreign adventures than Blair had in his.

But, I hear you cry, surely we have come a long way in the last ten years, with the creation of the much vaunted Comprehensive Approach. "Up to a point, Lord Copper".

Much has been achieved under this banner, particularly I understand latterly on the ground in Afghanistan. But we would have been much better served if we had had a Comprehensive Plan. For it was the absence of a national plan that led to what I saw as so much incoherence in both Afghanistan on the counter narcotics ticket and in Iraq when I commanded in Basra in 2007. At its best, the Comprehensive Approach has allowed departmental action to be coordinated on the ground to good national effect. At its worst, it has provided a political smokescreen, an illusion of coherence, whilst allowing departmental independence to dominate over government intent. The sum of government action needs to be more than the sum of its individual parts. At present there is no mechanism to cohere these individual parts and to add the value you get from conjoined action.

Let me give a grossly simplified illustration of the creation of cross-government activity as I have witnessed it.

A problem is identified.
Departments offer activity in pursuit of addressing this problem.
The government's PR people then announce that the government has identified a problem it will address by the following departmental activity.
No 10 is happy, the departments are happy, the PR and media message people are happy.

Until it is found that this voluntary and un-cohered activity does not actually amount to a plan:

There are gaps between departmental activities;
some work together, some are disconnected, others contradict each other;
and few endure to achieve the unified desired effect over time on the problem.

Take Afghanistan. For years, we have been told of the amount of drugs seized, the number of school opened, the miles of road built and the number of 'terrorist' arrests that have been made. And this suits what I call the photographic school of journalism. This paints a picture of what it sees, it

focuses on activity but is incapable of or uninterested in exploring why or where this present tense is heading. And this deflects from the key question, which should be, "So what? Where is the political plan that all this aid and security effort is meant to be enabling? And what about the future?" It was this that made the Whitehall debate about how to respond to the 2009 McCrystal plan for Afghanistan so futile. Given that the political plan was only going to be decided in Berlin the following spring, i.e. after the military Plan had been decided upon, the McCrystal plan was doomed from the start, lacking a political objective to enable. It is only latterly that the Coalition has been forced to accept the importance of this absence of a long-term political plan. If Whitehall is to move from an Approach to a Plan, it needs an agreed methodology and a command structure in Whitehall to enforce it.

Time now to put my money where my mouth is and define my terms when I talk of strategy, for it is only by doing so that I can hope to explain why its absence so undermined our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and why it risks dooming our ventures in N Africa even as they are just beginning.

Let's start on familiar ground, with Clausewitz, who famously defined strategy in terms of 'ends, ways and means'. My observation is that this can all too often be interpreted from our perspective only; to wit,

these are our ends we are pursuing,
these are our means we are going to deploy,
and these are our ways we are going to deploy them.

The vital player missing from this UK-government centric misinterpretation of 'ends, ways and means' is the enemy; and the enemy has a vote, as we have been reminded in Iraq, Afghanistan and will be again in Africa. So I have learnt to adapt Clausewitz in seeing 'strategy' as the constant process of cohering policy (the objectives) with reality (the object of one's policy) and resource (the assets, most importantly including time, required to close the gap). Policy is decided upon at the strategic level, reality is grappled with at the tactical level. Critically and least understood, resource is allocated at an intermediate level known in the military as the operational level. This is a level of command, not just a co-ordinating function; and it is this level of command that no longer exists in Whitehall. I am told this role used to be filled by what is still officially called the Central Department but is now more commonly known as the Treasury.

I understand it had authority not just over finance but also over the coherence of departmental actions. The Treasury's cohering authority fell victim to the Blair/Brown conflict, and the Cabinet Office has never been authorised to fill this command role and still only has co-ordinating but not directing authority.

This has removed a vital level of command without which Whitehall will struggle to create and can never hope to execute strategy.

Let me emphasise the constant process required to execute strategy over time. It is a constant process of cohering, as there are changes in reality, as resources change or face competing priorities, and as the original policy goals come under challenge.
The political damage of altering policy goals during a campaign makes it all the more important to choose achievable policy goals at the outset. As our political class gets less experienced in what is and is not achievable in the real world, so policy objectives are more likely to tend to the politically desirable than the actually achievable. And it is here that the Blair government is so culpable for ignoring Foreign Office caution before Iraq and Afghanistan. And did Cameron pay them any more attention with his Libyan policy? Perhaps we should pay more heed to the advice of Douglas Hurd, writing in 1997 on his lessons from the Balkans: "Do not proclaim in public what you hope to accomplish until you are confident that you can carry it through. Be prepared to say no, to stay out unless and until you have that confidence and share it with the main actors."
Having set realistic goals, a feedback loop between the policy, reality and resource needs to be established to keep these three in balance over time.

Cabinet government might once have been capable of executing strategy as described. But it has struggled to cope with the increasing responsibility of government, the increasing cross-departmental working required to discharge this responsibility, and the 24/7 media demand and speed of modern communications. In response, Jonathan Powell said before 1997 that a future Labour government would be more executive in style. The resulting trend towards centralising of policy making on No10 has combined with the demise of the Central Department cohering role. The demise of Cabinet has reduced departmental ministers to executors of others' policy, and the feedback loop that is so essential to strategy execution has been lost. Policy is now disconnected from execution and there is no operational level command to address the resource issues. In Iraq and Afghanistan, this resource issue was in large part avoided by the use of the 'reserve' that funded the operational costs above those the departments had planned for. Now that the UK is broke and still getting broker, where the new money will be found to fight this next new campaign is unclear to me.

As No10's dominance has grown, the disincentives to speak truth to power in Whitehall have also grown. I recall a bizarre moment in the FMD crisis where it became clear that the cost of saving an industry worth millions was going to run into the billions; but no minister could be found to tell the PM this, and so no challenge was made to the policy pledge to support the farmers no matter what.

Equally, the treatment of the FCO following the Camel Corps' opposition to the Iraq invasion acts as a disincentive to anyone to speak truth to power; and Cameron has openly dismissed 'armchair generals' who urged caution with regard to the Libyan operation.
Such disincentives to honesty invite perverted behaviours by Departments, and it could perhaps be understood if they sought advantage within a flawed policy rather than to challenge it; Whitehall is after all a battleground for resources.
So the military will ask for more resource for the security line of operation, DfID will ask for more aid money to improve well-being etc, and no-one will address the key questions of,

first, what a realistic, self-sustaining success looks like in Iraq, Afghanistan or now the Sahel and,

secondly but strategically vitally, how departmental activity will combine to achieve the effect over time.

When my headquarters arrived in Iraq in 2007, four years into our occupation, we found there was no Iraq-focussed political plan to which our military activity could be enabling; so, as the tactical, deployed military HQ, we had to write the political plan ourselves and get buy-in from the other departments in Theatre.
In Afghanistan, policy objectives have steadily reduced over time, forced by events, not our planning. This in the absence of any Whitehall or Coalition process that, based on our historic knowledge of Afghanistan, should have recognised at the outset the cultural realities of Afghanistan and the irrelevance of many of the West's traditional levers of power, and should prudently have lowered our ambitions accordingly. As soon as Laura Bush went on air to justify the invasion of Afghanistan on the basis of creating women's rights there, the subsequent strategic incoherence of our efforts was inevitable. Which is not to object to women's rights but rather to recognise that we could and should have anticipated that we lacked the means to change the cultural soil of Afghanistan.
It was the late and great Professor Richard Holmes who used to quote a Russian general as saying that " you can excuse us making a mess of Afghanistan, it was our first time. But you Brits, its your fourth! You have a great history, the trouble is you don't read it."

Now, you will rightly declare, I am making a comment more about our politicians and their politics than about government process. But I would argue that it is the lack of rigorous government process and education that makes it all too easy for politicians, themselves 'completely untrained for the government role they have been elected for', to pay attention more to the politics than to the good government of a situation. Jim Murphy, the Shadow defence secretary, admitted in the Guardian on 13 Feb 2013 that Blair and his government had rushed into Iraq and Afghanistan, in ignorance about Islam and ignoring Foreign

Office advice. A publicly recognised strategic methodology would have made it easier for the holes to be exposed in the government's approach at the start rather than have them rudely exposed by reality later on.

This tendency to prioritise politics over government would be made all the more powerful if the civil service were to follow suit. And there is some evidence that our civil service culture might increasingly be part of this problem. John Bourne, on his retirement as comptroller and auditor-general, head of the National Audit Office, said this in an article in the FT in 2008:

> "The top jobs should go to those who have successfully managed programmes and projects… At the moment they are given to those best at helping their ministers get through the political week. [Changing this would produce a new breed of civil servants who would concentrate on securing public services. It would alter ambition and behaviour down the line.]"

How generally true is the criticism? In December 2011, a letter was sent to the civil servants in the MoD directing that the reduced number of MoD civil servants was to produce the same MoD output by prioritising; and they were to make sure that their top priority remained to serve the needs of their minister.
The lack of a rigorous methodology to discipline behaviours makes prioritising politics over government all too easy.

I judge patience is running thin with the executive inadequacies of Whitehall.
In researching for this speech, I have discovered many bodies considering just this question of how to improve Whitehall. I haven't had a chance to explore 'public choice theory' by Buchanan and Tulloch; I have not caught up with the 'Better Government Initiative' run by Christopher Foster; and I am yet to have a long awaited meeting with Peter Riddell of the Institute for Government. And only last night I attended Andrew Rathmell's speech at the SF club on 'Why Whitehall can't do Strategy'. So I can only add my stick to the logpile others are building under extant Whitehall structures and processes; the question is how to light the bonfire. For I have said much of this before to 3 and 4 star civil servants and politicians, who, having not objected to the criticisms have made comments such as, 'we don't want to end up with a military government as in Pakistan, do we?', 'inefficiency is the price you pay for democracy', and 'the problem is just too big, no-one can get their arms round it, so the system will ignore the criticism and carry on as before'.

I don't know about you but I find those to be rather unsatisfactory responses.
As every householder knows, renovating the home whilst living in it is a nightmare; but we all know it's possible, and that the house is better afterwards

than it was before. To my mind, the reductions in Whitehall funding represent a good opportunity to renovate the structures and practices of Whitehall.
My question is, does the Whitehall political class have the will to change itself?
Before the last election, there were encouraging papers being issued by the Strategy Unit of the Cabinet Office, under the prompting of Gus O'Donnell and the pen of William Nye. These were quite open about the changing nature of the challenge and the need for reformed cross-Whitehall practices to respond to them. But after the election, GOD was ennobled, William Nye was posted to the PoW's office, and the CO Strategy Unit was disbanded after SDSR apparently on the basis that "we have the strategy, now its just about implementation". Then came the Arab Spring….

Since the SDSR, I have observed renovations only within existing structures and practices. In the MoD a series of internal reforms were instigated, to ensure it could deliver SDSR. But the Strategic Defence and Security Review was primarily about security and not defence; and achieving the goals of SDSR will take concerted effort by most departments of state. To repeat what I said earlier, it was the very first NSS in 2008 that sounded the conceptual death-knell of departmental primacy in addressing our national security challenges. It declared that no one department was sufficient to address them on its own and that teamwork ie. the Comprehensive Approach, was required. What is overdue is a review of the overall structure of Whitehall in response to the NSS, not a review within existing Whitehall structures. Whitehall should do to itself what quite rightly it has encouraged the Armed Forces to do over the last 20 years, which is to embrace Jointery, by creating cross-Whitehall doctrine, education and permanent not reactive structures to drive government activity.

Again, you will cry that this has already been done. And again I would retort by saying that the pattern of behaviour I observe in Whitehall in a crisis is to recognise the central executive deficit, create a central structure to cope with the crisis and then, as the crisis recedes in the corporate memory, for the big departments to re-assert themselves.

To take three examples,

- the Stabilisation Unit is merely the latest reincarnation of what began life as the Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit;
- the Civil Contingencies Secretariat has come up with some good contingencies but is not empowered to create and enforce consistent unifying methodology;
- and there is still no Ops Room for the UK in permanent session – our reactive C2 based on COBR is at odds with the pace and frequency of challenges in the 24/7 news era.

And as for the NSC, I have yet to see the evidence that this marks a fundamental shift in the effectiveness of government's handling of security issues. Apart from imposing an even faster battle rhythm on an already struggling system, I have seen no definitive break with the procedures that pertained under the NSC's predecessors, NSID under Gordon Brown and TIDO under Tony Blair, each of these committees having broadly the same remit. Indeed, there is an argument that, by allowing heads of intelligence to report weekly to the PM thus by-passing the JIC assessment system, the NSC institutionalised the very flaws that contributed to the dodgy dossier et al. That the Joint Committee on the NSS judged that the NSC got 'sidetracked into short-term crisis management' suggests again the power of the established Whitehall culture to subsume new ideas. For Whitehall's default setting is crisis management; it has conspicuously lacked, in my experience, a future tense.

To conclude, there is a consensus that Whitehall could do better. The challenge is how to get Whitehall to improve its cross-departmental capability to conceive and execute strategy. I believe it should be possible to create a X-Whitehall doctrine and executive methodology and to train all in the Whitehall village in its execution, without bringing Whitehall to its knees. More ambitiously, the central department should be re-empowered to direct finance and cohere activity to provide that missing operational level of command between policy and execution. And a rationalisation of departments on leaner functional lines would lead to better-integrated government action and a reduced bill in line with current austerity measures. For all this to happen, it will take a concerted effort by us all to light that bonfire that so many observers of Whitehall have built under current structures and practices.