



## **TIME TO GET OUT OF IRAQ**

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It is time now for us to get out of Iraq with dignity and honour while we still can.

This may sound strange coming from me. On March 18th 2003 in the House of Commons I voted for the war in Iraq. As Shadow Foreign Secretary I called upon my Party to do the same.

I feared the threat of weapons of mass destruction. On this I was wrong. So were many others. Indeed there are many questions which remain unanswered about the 'detailed, authoritative and extensive' information we were given in public and in Parliament at the time.

I believed that the ending of Saddam's regime and ambition would make the whole region safer and more stable. Indeed it might have, were it not for crass mistakes made early on. First the incredible decision by the American and British Governments immediately to dismantled Iraq's own security forces, thereby creating a vacuum into which the insurgents, the terrorists and the fundamentalists swiftly poured. I warned against this at the time. Second the unexplained abandonment of the US State Department's pre-prepared post-war reconstruction plan which I had consistently called for and which we had been promised by both governments. As we now know, the absence of such a plan led directly to the failure in many parts of Iraq to provide the basic facilities of electricity, clean water, and adequate food supplies, thereby fanning the flames of resentment which in turn further destabilised Iraq.

Today, whatever word games Tony Blair, Jack Straw and John Reid may try to play, everyone knows that terrorism is rampant and that Iraq is effectively in a state of civil war. It simply is not good enough for Jack Straw to deny it when it is the common talk of the region.

I believed too that we could leave Iraq a better place, governed by democracy and the rule of law. On that, the jury is still out and is likely to remain so for some time to come. For the moment the unavoidable truth is that Iraq is a mess - and a dangerous one at that. Far from getting better it is getting worse.

We cannot pretend that none of this is happening. We have been in Iraq for three long years. and it is now time to take stock. Let us be in no doubt; our Armed forces conducted themselves magnificently in the war itself. Their performance was exemplary. Their role and behaviour since, often in the most difficult and trying circumstances, have been a cause of pride. We owe them our gratitude and our praise. They have achieved much in the reconstruction of our area in Southern Iraq. Circumstances, however, are now becoming increasingly difficult. Our forces are increasingly being targeted. And their resources are now becoming increasingly stretched as our commitments in Afghanistan grow. The time has come to stop and ask 'what more can we do in Iraq?'



Our troops were told that they would stay 'until the job is done'. Despite frequent requests the Government has firmly resisted defining 'the job' except in the most general terms or setting parameters whereby a valid assessment can be made as whether it 'is done'. They are not prepared to say whether they are referring to 'our job in our area' or the overall Coalition job across the whole of Iraq. They know the actual question as to when the job is done is unanswerable.

Indeed the real question should not so much be whether the job 'is done' but whether British forces have done all they can, and in particular what more in a rapidly deteriorating situation they can achieve by staying on.

This brings me to what I believe is the compelling reason for making the call for withdrawal now. We are officially in Iraq, and have been since the war, to assist the civil authority in Iraq in the establishment and maintenance of public order. It is increasingly debatable whether there is any sustainable degree of public order to be maintained or indeed any real civil authority to assist anymore. Insurgency is on the increase - as demonstrated by the growing proportion of violent contacts with insurgents initiated by insurgents rather than by coalition forces. As for the civil authority, the new 'government' is headless and our own friends among Iraqi politicians on the ground, along with the Egyptian President and the Saudi Foreign Minister, declare openly that Iraq is now in a state of civil war. They point to the sectarian civilian conflict and they are right.

That to me is the deciding factor. We have no place in Iraq in a civil war. We cannot and must not take sides between Sunnis and Shias. It is not for us to try to hold them physically apart. The Americans talk about 'hunkering down' for the duration of any such civil conflict. To my mind that would be both pointless and dangerous. It has always been evident that in the event of civil war we should just get out. And that moment has now arrived.

We have achieved much against the odds in establishing a degree of stability in Southern Iraq. We have set a good example in treading that narrow path between occupation and assistance. We may even have made some friends in the hostile environment which is Iraq today. But as insurgency grows and sectarian conflict burgeons, it is now hard if not impossible to see what further good we can do by staying on. Having set out at the beginning to be part of the solution - and in the early days having partially succeeded - it is now sadly evident that we are in danger of becoming part of the problem.

This is no criticism, either express or inferred, of our armed forces. They have fulfilled what has been required of them and more. They have done so with professionalism and dedication. But the idiotic disbandment of the Iraqi security apparatus, the deliberate abandonment of the US State Department's post-war reconstruction plan, and the unbelievable state of denial of both the US and British governments in relation to the realities in Iraq today have made their position untenable.

This is not about how we would like things to be. This is about how things really are – and no amount of wishful thinking can any longer disguise the truth.



The shadow of Vietnam hovers and our options narrow. We can withdraw now on the basis that we have done what we can, or we can risk being driven to withdraw in less favourable and probably more dangerous circumstances later. If there were good reasons for staying on now, that might be a risk worth taking. The stark truth is that there are precious few.

We have done our job. We have done it well. Now we should get out.

*Michael Ancram served in the last Conservative Government and during the last four years has held the portfolios of Shadow Foreign Secretary and Shadow Defence Secretary. He currently serves on the House of Commons Intelligence Select Committee.*