



Defence Committee

Chairman, Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP

Committee Office, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

020 7219 6872 / 5857 defcom@parliament.uk www.parliament.uk/defcom

The Rt Hon Theresa May MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

8 May 2018

Dear Prime Minister,

The Defence Committee recently considered the enclosed letter, which Mr Hollington forwarded to us on the advice of Damian Hinds. While members did not feel that an inquiry into operations in Afghanistan on the lines of the Chilcot inquiry into Iraq would be likely to prove fruitful, the Committee did support publication by the Ministry of Defence of the lessons learnt work they have undoubtedly already undertaken. If this is not possible, even in redacted form, then we would urge you very strongly to appoint an Official Historian as soon as possible, so that there can be an authoritative public analysis of operations in Afghanistan.

I am copying this letter to Gavin Williamson and Damian Hinds.

Yours ever,

Julian

Rt Hon. Dr Julian Lewis
Chairman of the Committee

From: R E C Hollington

Dr Julian Lewis MP
c/o the Defence Committee Office
House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

18th April 2018

Dear Doctor Lewis,

Damian Hinds, my MP, was kind enough to forward to you my letter to him seeking his help in securing an inquiry into the UK involvement in operations in Afghanistan. His office manager has let me know that you asked for me to send you a hard copy, along with this covering note so that you could circulate my letter.

This note and enclosure is me so doing as requested and I would ask that you circulate as widely as appropriate, including to any former servicemen in sitting in both chambers. I am more than happy to discuss the contents and reasons why such an inquiry is essential, with anyone who is able to assist in getting this necessary inquiry underway as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robin Hollington', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Robin Hollington

From: R E C Hollington

**Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP
MP for East Hampshire
House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA**

5th April 2018

Damian, back in 2016 I asked you if there was any news on an Afghanistan inquiry, on the basis that the Chilcot investigation had taken some 7 years to deliver its findings on a 6 year war. At the time the response from Mike Penning MP, Minister of State for the Armed Forces, was that "lessons have been learned" and no decision has been made on a future inquiry. I have left this 18 months, before chasing again.

In your recent reply you asked me to write to explain why I thought there should be an inquiry into the Afghanistan Operations and what the focus of the inquiry should be.

Firstly, let me look at the longevity of the Iraq inquiry. The Iraq war started in March 2003, and quickly became an occupation while rebuilding the country and 6 years later the UK in Apr 2009, combat operations ended. Less than two months later the PM announced an inquiry, that took six years. By comparison, the Afghan conflict lasted 13 years, so it is not unreasonable to extrapolate an enquiry lasting 15 years, which means it would be reporting some 30 years after the start of the conflict. ***On that basis alone, it is now time to set an inquiry in motion*** though there are further observations around the focus of such an activity.

Secondly, let me share some of my experiences as a serving Royal Marines Officer both at Northwood Naval HQ during the first Gulf War and then in MOD itself in the later 90s. My overarching memory of operations and exercises, was that there was always a "Lessons Documented" exercise on completion, as these lessons were very rarely learned; in part they could not be learned and implemented as the budget and procurement process couldn't afford, nor cope with the changes. We only need look at the current sorry state to understand things have not really changed.

Of further relevance, in the 90's I spent a total of almost 18 months on firstly the Junior and then Senior Staff Courses. The overarching lesson in both was the "*Principles of War*" which have been derived from Clausewitz "*On War*"¹. It appears that nothing has changed as "*The 2014 edition of UK Defence Doctrine (JDP 0-01, 5th edition)*", still shows the ***First Principle*** to be the ***Selection and Maintenance of the Aim***. More of that shortly.

Few would argue against the legitimacy of the initial strikes in Afghanistan in Oct 2001, even if some might be surprised at the speed of response post 9/11. Despite the failure to catch Bin Laden and Mullah Mohammed Omar, that Hamid Karzai was elected head of state some 9 months later demonstrates significant success. However, the preparation and build-up for the second gulf war was potentially the first signs of forgetting the First Principle. In 2003 Afghanistan was relatively

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: N. Trübner, 1873), in German Vom Kriege (Berlin: Dümmlers Verlag, 1832).

safe; a certain freedom of movement was possible. However, after the opening of a concurrent campaign in Iraq and the growing casualties there, eyes were, in my view, taken off Afghanistan. The Taliban were able to observe the success of IEDs in Iraq and plan for a period of years similar action in Afghanistan. ***This needs to be considered at an inquiry and not hidden in an MOD Lessons Learned dossier.***

Around this time the lack of post conflict planning for rebuilding the country to win the peace began to show. American contractors, who by their nature required military protection, were making significant money for themselves (up to \$2000 per day) and shareholders, (such as the then Vice President). Had the local population, whose typical earnings were a dollar a day, to rebuild infrastructure for say \$100 a day, some 20 locals could have employed for the price of one contractor. This would have created both a vibrant local economy ***and*** generated buy in from the population. At the same time the Taliban who were paying \$10 a day would have lost recruits, or been bankrupted to fund the rebellion, (these figures are estimations). ***This needs to be considered at an inquiry and not hidden in an MOD Lessons Learned dossier.***

I now need to verge into reasoned thinking, rather than just fact. In 2005/6 the Army in Iraq were getting their backsides kicked in and around Basra; the pull out was being mooted. At the same time the Defence Budget was largely focused on the Royal Navy and the RAF. After the "excitement of conflict" what role would there be for the Army once the retreat was complete, especially as there were next to no programmes to modernise the Army (in particular). Matt Cavanagh, a senior advisor to Gordon Brown at the time observed that the military as well as politicians relied too heavily on the analogy with Northern Ireland and neglected the lessons of Iraq. He supports the assertion made by Britain's former Afghan envoy, Sherard Cowper-Coles, (though furiously denied by the top brass), that the military pushed for Helmand to expunge the shame of 'defeat' in Iraq and to justify their budget requests. It was obvious by the middle of the last decade that the MoD's long-running budget problems were growing more acute, and that a strategic defence review was overdue. Afghanistan was seen as an opportunity to make the financial case for defence, or for a particular service (the army), or a particular set of military capabilities. ***This needs to be considered at an inquiry and not hidden in an MOD Lessons Learned dossier.***

About the same time the Defence Secretary, Dr John Reid stated, "We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years' time without firing one shot"! Whatever one might think about the then Minister, naïve he was not. Why then, would he come up with such a statement? I have been told of a meeting where Senior Army Officers briefed him that they could "do Helmand without firing a shot". ***This needs to be considered at an inquiry and not hidden in an MOD Lessons Learned dossier.***

Of course, the move into Helmand to reduce the poppy production, open markets and allow girls to attend schools were laudable intentions. They were, however another example of failure to abide by the *First Principle of UK Military Doctrine*. The change of aim was then not backed up with the support and kit that was required and servicemen died as a result (snatch land rovers but one example). ***This needs to be considered at an inquiry and not hidden in an MOD Lessons Learned dossier.***

Personally, I can observe that Helmand appears to border the Swat Valley, the eastern side of which allegedly has the Pakistan nuclear facilities. When you arranged for me to meet the then Minister of State after Richard was killed, after I wanted to know the real reason we were in Helmand, his reply was along the lines of, "Yes that's a difficult one I am often asked and I usually reply, well it would be

embarrassing if we/NATO had to pull out in the face of insurgents"! ***This needs to be considered at an inquiry and not hidden in an MOD Lessons Learned dossier.***

Anecdotally, the officer sent to establish the requirements to quell the uprising in Helmand Province, returned with the message: "Uprising, what uprising? There will be one if you go in". Again anecdotally, the first troops to deploy on a "Hearts and Minds" campaign in Helmand in 2006, 3 Para, began patrolling and kicking in the doors of those they hoped to win over. ***This needs to be considered at an inquiry and not hidden in an MOD Lessons Learned dossier.***

From memory there were 6 deaths among the UK forces up to the point of going into Helmand, rising to 453 by the time we pulled out, now 456, without counting post conflict suicides. ***To the extent that ~98% of the deaths and injuries occurred after the expansion of the aim, the reasons for going into Helmand and the provision of support and kit to the post 2006 Herrick operations needs to be the focus of the inquiry.***

The Imposition of Western Style democracy on tribal cabals, resulting in the 2009 Operation Panther's Claw, where 15 British Servicemen died so 150 locals could vote ***needs to be considered at an inquiry and not hidden in an MOD Lessons Learned dossier.***

Damian, I could go on, but will leave it there as there must be enough to warrant a proper inquiry from the above. I will, however, finish by returning to the length of time this has already taken. Richard died before I was 50. I have already outlined how I will likely have reached my new retirement age before I get the answers that are reasonable, not just to me, but the next of kin, family and friends of all the bereaved and injured. ***An Afghan Inquiry is now a must. Excuses and prevarication are not longer acceptable.***

I would be grateful if you could copy this to Johnny Mercer.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robin Hollington', followed by a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that extends to the right.

Robin Hollington