

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOMINICK CHILCOTT, DEPUTY HEAD OF MISSION OF THE BRITISH EMBASSY

INTERVIEW BY JAMES BAIRD



Mr. Chilcott came to UC Berkeley's Department of Political Science on March 18, 2010, to discuss US/UK policy relations. PolicyMatters joined him afterward for a one-on-one interview where he talked about the collaboration between the US and the UK in the war in Afghanistan. Chilcott gave his thoughts on the state of the current war effort, the long-term prospect for peace, and the UK's foreign policy goals in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen.

CONVERSATION

Dominick Chilcott assumed his post as Deputy Head of Mission at the British Embassy in Washington in January 2008. He previously held numerous civil service positions, including Private Secretary for European, Transatlantic and Middle Eastern affairs, Counsellor for External Affairs (UK's permanent representation to the European Union in Brussels), and head of the Iraq Policy Unit for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. His areas of specialty have included Africa, Ankara, Gibraltar, Lisbon, the European Union, the Middle East, Sri Lanka and Maldives.

Chilcott was born in 1959. After schooling at St Joseph's College, Ipswich, he served in the Royal Navy for one year. He studied philosophy and theology at Greyfriars Hall, Oxford University. He is married and has four children.

PolicyMatters Journal (PMJ): What is the British government's role in Afghanistan, broadly defined?

Dominick Chilcott (DC): Our role in Afghanistan is to keep Britain safe, essentially. We are there because we know that a very high proportion of the plots against UK interests have links back to the so-called badlands between the Pakistan and Afghan border, and we need to work with allies to tackle that very real threat that it represents to the UK. The way we want to tackle this is by helping the Afghan government itself, and indeed the Pakistan government, to confront those who want to destabilize these governments, to confront them, deal with

them, defuse the problem, and stop those places from becoming safe havens for international terrorists.

PMJ: Recently, [US Defense] Secretary Gates alluded to the possibility of an early start to withdrawal in Afghanistan. Does your government, or you personally, share in his optimism?

DC: I think the answer is yes and yes, and the reason is that there do seem to be signs that al Qaeda has been severely disrupted in the region, and the recent operation in Helmand province seems to have gone well; there is real progress on the ground. So the aim of having enough progress to begin withdrawing troops by July 2011 seems to be very much on track. I think there are reasons to be optimistic that we have a strategy in place now that can deliver the result that we want.

PMJ: Are there any differences in the US and British foreign policy broadly in the Middle East, and specifically in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

DC: I think on Afghanistan and Pakistan we are shoulder to shoulder. There is a constant dialogue going on between us, but that's the sort of dialogue you would have within an administration as well as between countries that are working as very close allies. I don't think it means there is a difference of significance or difference of approach. So we're working on

all aspects: on the military operations, on the reintegration and reconciliation, on working to build up Afghan capacity in the army and the police, the rule of law, dealing with counter-narcotics together. I don't think there are any significant differences.

PMJ: Can you elaborate on the London conferences that were held in January? Were there any real tangibles that came out of that?

DC: Well, the timing of the London conference was a few months after the Afghan election results; the Afghan election was obviously held sometime before. So the conference was the next moment at which the international community could come together and hear from the Afghan government; what their program was for their next period, the next presidential period, and for us in the international community to say what it is that we would do to support that program. And this pretty much went as planned. [Afghan President] Karzai and a number of his ministers talked about what they would do on the area of security and economic development, and various members of the international community said how we would support them. I think that worked very well. It was never going to be a pledging conference; it was more a conference of setting out a strategy for the Afghan government and for us to show how we would work in harmony with it. So I think to that extent it was a success. There was another element to the conference that was important: we feel, have felt for a while, that there needs to be more engagement from the countries in the region, together, collectively to try and find, or help support, a solution in Afghanistan. The conference was an opportunity for those voices to be heard as well. So I think that part of it is still relatively undeveloped, but it was at least a start.

PMJ: There was a second conference held at the same time.

DC: There was a meeting on Yemen at the same time. This was a meeting that was prompted by concerns about Yemen becoming another country where there would be space for al Qaeda to be able to operate. We wanted to be able to respond to the needs of Yemen, the government of Yemen. President Saleh of Yemen is an ally of ours and we wanted to be able to

find a way to support him. So that conference, well, it was not really a conference, it was a meeting of a couple of hours or so, established the idea of a group of friends of Yemen. They are going to be working together, not in the security fields, but in the sort of economic and government fields to give support to President Saleh so that he and his administration can provide the services that the people need. That will help bolster the administration and reduce the risks that the country will fall prey to the forces like al Qaeda.

PMJ: One last question regarding Afghanistan. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, off of the Number 10 Downing Street website, is quoted as saying,

“These are aims that are clear and justified—and also realistic and achievable. It remains my judgment that a safer Britain requires a safer Afghanistan.”

You echoed that, and so has Foreign Secretary David Miliband. Long-term, how realistic is it to establish any sort of lasting political stability or regional stability, and do you have any thoughts of anything we are not doing now, or any other ideas that have been brought to the table, of how we can try and obtain more long-term stability in the region?

DC: The aspirations of ordinary Pakistanis and ordinary Afghans and other people in the region are not so dissimilar from aspiration of ordinary people everywhere, which is, they want jobs, reasonable standard of welfare for their families, they want education for their children, they want decent medical services, and that sort of thing. The best way we can help stability, I think, is to have a global trading environment in which these people have the best chance of achieving those sorts of things.

So in the long term, I think that's how we do it. We do it immediately now by providing this kind of unusual and urgent assistance to the government of Afghanistan and by providing other sources of assistance to the government of Pakistan. But when this stops becoming a sort of immediate existential security issue, then we should be looking for the kind of global cooperation, particularly on economic issues, that allows these countries to realize their potential.