

# From Suez to Iraq

*Adam Price MP  
Margaret Beckett MP  
Jeremy Corbyn MP  
Alex Salmond MP*

*On 31 October 2006, the House of Commons discussed the Iraq war in the first formal (albeit very brief) debate since the invasion of 2003. This debate was called by Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party, who had earlier initiated the campaign to impeach Tony Blair for High Crimes and Misdemeanours in relation to the invasion of Iraq (see A Case to Answer by Glen Rangwala & Dan Plesch, Spokesman £5). We excerpt some of the key speeches. This call for an Inquiry was narrowly lost – 273 votes for and 298 against.*

**Mr. Speaker:** We now come to the main business, and I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister ...

**Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (Plaid Cymru – the Party of Wales):** I beg to move,

That this House believes that there should be a select committee of seven honourable Members, being members of Her Majesty's Privy Council, to review the way in which the responsibilities of Government were discharged in relation to Iraq and all matters relevant thereto, in the period leading up to military action in that country in March 2003 and in its aftermath.

It is an honour to move this motion on behalf of my hon. Friends and of right hon. and hon. Members on all sides of the House of Commons. It is the culmination of a long campaign, and it is a debate that is long overdue. The motion has cross-party support because the issue at its heart is far bigger than one of party politics. It is about accountability. It is about the monumental catastrophe of the Iraq war, which is the worst foreign policy disaster certainly since Suez, and possibly since Munich. It is about the morass in which, regrettably, we still find ourselves. It is also about a breakdown in our system of government – a fault line in our constitution that only we, as Parliament, can fix. Fix it we must, if there are not to be further mistakes and other Iraqs under other Prime Ministers, in which case we shall only have ourselves to blame ...

The debate on 18 March 2003 was one of the most momentous – some would say calamitous – debates in the House of Commons in modern times. The Prime Minister gave one of the great performances of his life; it was full of certainty and undaunted by doubt. But unfortunately, we now know that much of what he told us that night was false. It is no wonder that democratic politics has haemorrhaged public confidence. Only we in this Parliament can stem that flow; we can

rebuild some of that trust by holding a proper inquiry into what went on.

What could an inquiry usefully do? There will inevitably be a range of views within the House, which is why we need a sufficiently broad remit. But three central questions need to be answered. How could the Government take us to war on claims that turned out to be false? When precisely was the decision to have this war made? Why has the planning for, and conduct of, the occupation proved to be so disastrous? Maybe the hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Mr. Bailey) can give us some answers?

**Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Labour/Co-op):** I quite understand that the hon. Gentleman feels very deeply about this issue. But do his electorate in Wales and the electorate in Scotland consider it to be the most pressing issue affecting them?

**Adam Price:** I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that, like many other Members, I have constituents who are now on their third deployment to Iraq, and, yes, they want us to debate this issue. Some would argue – like the hon. Gentleman, no doubt – that we should not even have this debate while troops remain on the ground in Iraq. If we follow the logic of the Government’s argument, the graver the mistake – and, therefore, the greater the danger to which our troops are exposed – the less the Government should be required to defend their record.

**Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Conservative):** Would the hon. Gentleman care to remind the House that the argument that we should not debate these matters when troops are operational is precisely the argument that was made in the Norway debate, and which, happily, was rejected by people like my father, who voted against Chamberlain and brought in Churchill?

**Adam Price:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes the point very well. We need to turn the logic of the Government on its head. We need to do so precisely for the sake of our troops. We have been led into this quagmire by way of a false rationale and without a clear strategy, and we need to debate the Government’s appalling record. The troops deserve nothing less ...

Almost on a weekly basis, we see senior military figure after senior military figure making yet another devastating assessment of the Government’s policy-making capacity. Lord Guthrie said that the policies are cuckoo. Lord Inge said that there was a lack of clear strategy at the Ministry of Defence. Most damning of all was the verdict of the current head of the Army, who said that

‘history will show that the planning for what happened after the initial ... war fighting phase was poor, probably based more on optimism than sound planning.’

Unfortunately, we have not seen that kind of honesty from any Government Minister to date. However, it is fair to say that the Foreign Secretary came perilously close when she said that history may judge the Iraq war to have been a

disaster. Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of waiting for history's verdict; we need some answers and action now.

A Government who were prepared to parade before our eyes dossier after dodgy dossier of carefully edited intelligence will not now let us read any of the intelligence on what is happening on the ground. We have had no comprehensive statement to date of Government policy. In February last year, the Prime Minister promised the Liaison Committee that General Luck's audit of coalition security strategy in Iraq would be published. For the record, I quote the Prime Minister:

'I have seen a draft that is still under discussion ... When there is a finished article, it will be published.'

It never was.

Before the Government come back and say, 'That was not our fault; the decision not to publish was made in Washington' – like so many other foreign policy decisions under this Government – I should point out to Treasury Ministers that they have not published a single word of Sir Ronnie Flanagan's assessment of the UK's contribution to Iraqi security sector reform, which was completed 10 months ago. Of course we understand that parts of these reports have to be withheld for security reasons, but does the Foreign Secretary really believe that Parliament can do its duty in holding the Government to account if we get no information about their strategy?

There are two Iraqs: the Iraq of George Bush and the Prime Minister, where things are going to plan and getting better all the time; and the real Iraq of murder and mayhem, whose future is uncertain. The state of denial that characterises the Government's policy now mirrors the state of delusion that characterises their policy in the run-up to war. The Prime Minister told us that night that it was 'beyond doubt' that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, even though the intelligence supplied was packed with doubt. He rattled off the huge quantities of WMD that he said had been left unaccounted for. Then he treated us to the punch-line:

'We are asked now seriously to accept that in the last few years – contrary to all history, contrary to all intelligence – Saddam decided unilaterally to destroy those weapons. I say that such a claim is palpably absurd.' – [*Official Report*, 18 March 2003; Vol. 401, c. 762.]

Well, not as things turned out. In my more uncharitable moments, I am reminded of that famous Aneurin Bevan put-down during the Suez crisis. He said, 'If Sir Anthony Eden is sincere in what he is saying – and he may be, he may be – then he is too stupid to be Prime Minister.' ... Before I give way to the hon. Gentleman, I should like to state as a matter of record that I do not believe that the Prime Minister is stupid; that is a wholly unwarranted and unfounded accusation.

**Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe) (Labour):** The difficulty that I and many others have with the idea of a fresh inquiry is the partisan response to the previous four inquiries, whereby those who did not wish to accept what they heard simply

rejected them as whitewashes. Does the hon. Gentleman accept the Butler inquiry, the Hutton inquiry and the all-party inquiries that we have already had?

**Adam Price:** I have heard this charge of political opportunism – *[Interruption.]* Well, I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that, facing as we are elections in Wales and Scotland, and given that we have one of the most unpopular Prime Ministers in history, political opportunism should mean that we would like to keep him there. In fact, we are doing what is right on a cross-party basis. On the inquiries to which the hon. Gentleman referred, the key issue is: how can the Butler and Hutton inquiries have been genuinely independent of the Executive when their remit and membership were decided by the Prime Minister himself? When you are in the dock, Mr. Speaker, you are usually not allowed to make decisions about the charge sheet, the judge and the jury.

**Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South) (Conservative):** Does the hon. Gentleman recall that during the debate on the Hutton inquiry the Prime Minister actually confessed that he was unaware that there was evidence that the weapons of mass destruction for which he was looking were just defensive weapons – artillery shells or small-calibre weaponry? He was unaware of that at the time, as was Hutton, so we had a situation in which the Prime Minister was making representations to the House on evidence that he did not understand and had not read.

**Adam Price:** Absolutely. The responsibility of Ministers to tell the truth is not just in making sure that they say what they believe to be true, but testing it against the facts – actually getting into the detail – and there is plenty of evidence, as the hon. Gentleman says, that that did not happen in that case.

**Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton) (Conservative):** Is not this symptomatic of the way the Government addresses such important issues? They held several narrowly defined inquiries, rather as they did with foot and mouth, so that we never got the full picture, which is of course very much to their benefit.

**Adam Price:** Absolutely. The wording of our motion reflects the wording of the Franks inquiry, so that there can be a broad-ranging inquiry and we can learn lessons, to avoid repeating mistakes in the future ...

**Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central) (Lab)** Does the hon. Gentleman share my view that one of the things at stake this afternoon is the credibility of Parliament, and that the key responsibilities of Parliament are to scrutinise the Executive and hold it to account? If we fail to fulfil those responsibilities in relation to the Iraq war we shall further deepen the growing and worrying imbalance between Parliament and the Executive.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear.

**Adam Price:** The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mark Fisher) has laid bare the constitutional question, which is at the heart of the debate, about restoring the balance of power between Parliament and the Executive.

**Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (Liberal Democrat):** Some have accused the hon. Gentleman of opportunism in choosing to debate this subject on an Opposition day, but does he agree that the people of Wales are keen to get to the truth of the matter and that what we really need today is a sober and considered debate rather than point-scoring – primarily by a very defensive Government? Does he hope that rather than putting party political interests first we can make the interests of democracy and our mistakes in Iraq the primary consideration in our debate?

**Adam Price:** I agree, and I pay tribute to courageous Members on both sides of the House who have declared support against their party line. Some things are genuinely more important than party politics, and it is a good day for parliamentary democracy when we see beyond party loyalty and look at issues of principle ...

I want to return to some of the Prime Minister's statements that were out of kilter with much of what he was being told. To give just one example, on 3 April 2002 he said: 'We know that he' – Saddam Hussein – 'has stockpiles of major amounts of chemical and biological weapons.'

But in the previous month, the most that the Joint Intelligence Committee could come up with was:

'We believe Iraq retains some production equipment, and some small stocks of chemical warfare agent precursors, and may have hidden small quantities of agents and weapons.'

So 'may' became 'we know' and 'small quantities' became 'major stockpiles'; that was the pattern in the presentation of the case. Small changes in emphasis and the selective use of intelligence were repeatedly used to transform a threat from minor to dire and doubtful to definite, and caveats and caution to blood-chilling certainties.

Evidence that would have undermined the case was held back. The Prime Minister frequently cited the defection of Hussein Kamel, Saddam Hussein's son-in-law, and his admission in 1995 that Iraq had indeed had an extensive WMD programme. However, what the Prime Minister omitted to tell the House was that Hussein Kamel also told UN inspectors in 1995 that he had personally ordered the destruction of all biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, and that that had happened.

Most indefensible of all was justification of the war in Iraq on the basis that it would reduce the likelihood of a terrorist attack, even though the intelligence services were saying the opposite at the time.

**Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Labour):** Does the hon. Gentleman also concede that any inquiry should look in some detail at the circumstances under

which the UN weapons inspectors, led by Hans Blix, were withdrawn from Iraq in January 2003 and not allowed to go back, having confirmed that they believed with 99 per cent certainty that there were no such weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?

**Adam Price:** Absolutely. I entirely I agree with the hon. Gentleman ...

As we have learned over the past few days, with the leaked Cabinet minute and the leaked national intelligence estimate from the United States, the invasion of Iraq has increased the threat of terrorist attacks. It is a sad indictment of the Government that we learn more from leaked Cabinet papers than we ever do from a Cabinet Minister speaking at the Dispatch Box. I hope that this afternoon will be an honourable exception.

Another critical issue surrounded by confusion and controversy was the timing of the decision to go to war. We were told right up to the last few days before the debate in the House that no decision had been taken, but there is now compelling evidence that the Prime Minister had already made a decision to invade a year earlier. As early as March 2002, the Prime Minister's foreign policy adviser, Sir David Manning, was assuring Condoleezza Rice of the Prime Minister's unbudgeable support for regime change. Days later, Sir Christopher Meyer sent a dispatch to Downing Street detailing how he repeated that commitment to the US Deputy Defence Secretary. The ambassador added that the Prime Minister would need a cover for military action:

'I then went through the need to wrong-foot Saddam on the inspectors and the UN Security Council resolutions.'

Yet throughout that period, the Prime Minister was insisting that the war was not inevitable and no decision had been made.

Most incredibly of all, in the most recent leaked memorandum, we read that, in a meeting with the Prime Minister, the President even suggested provoking a war with Saddam by flying a US spy plane bearing UN colours over Iraq and enticing the Iraqis to take a shot at it. That is the clearest suggestion yet that the UN was being used not to prevent war, but as a pretext for beginning it.

**Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Labour):** Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House whether, in his preparation for this debate, he had discussions with any representatives of the Iraqi Government? Has he had representations from the Iraqi trade union movement? Is it not right that the voice of ordinary Iraqi people who support their democratic Government and the actions taken should be heard in this debate?

**Adam Price:** I would welcome the opportunity to go to Iraq. I have been trying to go. I was told by the former Foreign Secretary that it was not safe for a Member of Parliament to go to Iraq. That is a sad indictment of the state of affairs on the ground. Those who will support the motion include Members who opposed the war and those who supported it ...

There is no shame in changing one's mind when new facts come to light. Ask the Attorney-General. He changed his mind three times in three weeks. He finally decided on 13 March 2003, after talking things through with his secretary, that his 7 March opinion was wrong after all and that, to quote the Attorney-General's recent disclosure to the Information Commissioner,

'the better view was that a further resolution was not legally necessary'.

Incredibly, that U-turn was not based on a detailed paper setting out the legal arguments. The Attorney-General who, by his own admission, is not an expert in international law, did not ask for legal advice until after he had come to his decision. [*Interruption.*] The Minister is shaking his head. I am reading from the Government's own disclosure to the Information Commissioner, which states:

'It was also decided to prepare a statement setting out the Attorney's view of the legal position and to send instructions to counsel to help in the preparation of that public statement.'

So the Attorney-General decided what the legal position was, and then asked for legal advice. You could not make it up, Mr. Speaker – well, you could if you were the Attorney-General, apparently.

The Attorney-General went on in the same disclosure statement to admit, crucially, that the revival argument – the notion that the use of force authorised by resolution 678 from the first Gulf war was capable of being revived by the Security Council – 'was and remains controversial'. Finally, a full three years on from the invasion, we have an unequivocal admission from the Attorney-General that his statement to the House that the war was legal was 'controversial' – his word, not mine.

**Chris Bryant (Labour):** The hon. Gentleman has said one thing this afternoon with which I wholeheartedly agree: the people of Wales will be looking at the debate with interest. However, many service families will want to know his view not about the beginnings of the war and whether troops should have gone to Iraq in the first place, but about whether they should remain there now. Is it his position that they should leave immediately?

**Adam Price:** With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, he knows my position because we debated that a week ago. We are having a different debate, but my position – [*Interruption.*] I would gladly debate this with the Prime Minister any time. Let us have ... this debate now. I would welcome the opportunity to have a debate about the withdrawal – [*Interruption.*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Order. Mr. Hall, it is not your function to heckle an hon. Member constantly, especially when I have given an instruction. I am looking at a few other Members who should behave themselves as well.

**Adam Price:** There is a fundamental breakdown at the heart of the Government that is continuing to affect decisions that are being made now. The Government have made a catalogue of errors that have resulted in problems on the ground. As hon. Members have said, the problem was that we had not government by Cabinet, but government by cabal. The delicate checks and balances of our constitution were swept away. Cabinet was sidelined and Parliament was misled – [Hon. Members: ‘Order!’] I did not say by whom.

**Mr. Speaker:** Order. The hon. Gentleman is in order.

**Adam Price:** There is a problem at the heart of our constitution and tonight we need to reapply the constitutional brakes. The military men have been lining up to criticise and so have the mandarins. A letter from Sir Michael Quinlan, of all people, a former permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence, said that the Prime Minister

‘exerted or connived ... to mould legal advice to his preference and failed to disclose fully ... even that moulded advice; and ... so arranged the working of the cabinet that colleagues had no timely or systematic opportunity to consider the merits of his policy in an informed manner’.

Lord Butler made the same point in an interview in *The Spectator*. He pointed out that decisions were made on the prime ministerial sofa, rather than in meetings with minutes around the Cabinet table, with all that meant for both the quality of, and proper accountability for, decision making. Pluralism in the Government, a proper role for Parliament and the Cabinet and a truly independent civil service are there to act as a check on hubris in government. That is why we need to recalibrate the constitution of this United Kingdom and rebalance power for the benefit of Parliament, at the expense of an over-mighty Executive. We are otherwise reduced to the sorry spectacle of an Attorney-General changing his mind to save his political master’s skin.

Let us remind ourselves once again of the central fact: we fought the war because of an arsenal of weapons that proved to be non-existent. Many thousands of people have paid with their lives for that mistake, and the same mirage of deception and disinformation continues to cloud our understanding of what is happening on the ground.

**Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Labour):** To clarify the point for my understanding, will the hon. Gentleman have the courtesy to tell the House whether he thinks that British troops should withdraw now?

**Adam Price:** We had a full debate, which I led, and my position is absolutely clear. Where was the right hon. Gentleman?

The constant hailing of non-existent progress by the Government is an insult to those who genuinely appreciate what is really happening in a worsening situation.

‘ ... When Adam Price MP, the Honourable Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr, produced a report laying out the grounds for impeachment [of Tony Blair], few gave it credence. One exception, typically, was the then father of the House, Tam Dalyell, who said: “I think as a document it requires refutation in some detail. What they have produced is a perfectly serious document that makes a coherent case.” Dalyell warned ministers of the dangers of “dismissing it as a joke”, but they didn’t listen.

Undeterred by his initial setback, Price changed tack and tabled a motion calling for a committee of seven senior MPs to conduct an inquiry into the events leading up to the war on Iraq and the aftermath of the conflict. It was this motion that finally led to the debate of 31 October, which Blair had spent three years trying to avoid.

That the government came within 25 votes of defeat is a tribute to Price’s tenacity. Anyone watching in the chamber on that afternoon would have to agree that his sober and moving speech was that of a fine parliamentarian ...’

*Martin Bright, New Statesman, 6 November 2006*

It is a scandal that, as yet, not a single Minister has unequivocally admitted that things in Iraq have gone wrong. Both in the run-up to the war and in its aftermath the Government’s policy has been characterised by a cocktail of wishful thinking, self-delusion and evasion. The sequence of events that led us to commit our armed forces to a war that was illegal and unnecessary is as yet unexplained. The strategy for removing them remains unpublished. The inquiry that we are calling for is not only essential to understanding what happened three and a half years ago; it is imperative in understanding where we go from here. It is impossible truly to discern the problems on the ground in Iraq unless we appreciate what went wrong – the mistakes and misjudgments that took us there in the first place.

History does not repeat itself, as Mark Twain once said, but it does rhyme. Fifty years ago today, our Government began bombing Egypt under the cover of darkness. That invasion, too, was based on a falsehood. Anthony Eden secretly colluded with Israel and France, and kept Parliament in the dark. It is a matter of debate as to whether the Prime Minister deliberately deceived us, but one way or another we were certainly misled. The evidence clearly suggests that he had privately assured President Bush that he would join the invasion. Here was a Prime Minister so deluded by his determination to do what he believed to be right that he began to think not as *primus inter pares* but as an acting head of state. It is time now to tell the Prime Minister and all future Prime Ministers that they are not presidents, and that the policy of this United Kingdom does not always have to be the policy of the United States.

**The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Margaret Beckett):** I beg to move, To leave out from ‘House’ to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

‘recognising that there have already been four separate independent committees of inquiry into military action in Iraq and recognising the importance of learning all possible lessons from military action in Iraq and its aftermath, declines at this time, whilst the whole effort of the Government and the armed forces is directed towards improving the condition of Iraq, to make a proposal for a further inquiry which would divert attention from this vital task.’

The motion before the House today calls for the creation of a new inquiry

‘to review the way in which the responsibilities of Government were discharged in relation to Iraq...in the period leading up to military action in that country in March 2003 and in its aftermath.’

The question that I want to put to the House is not so much why – because of course it is perfectly sensible and legitimate to say that there will come a time when these issues will be explored in the round and in full, so that we can learn whatever lessons we can from them – but rather, why this specific inquiry, and much more to the point, why now.

Unlike at the time of the Falklands war we now have a framework of Select Committees that carry out independent inquiries. I recognise that the official Opposition have tabled an amendment that suggests a Falklands-type inquiry in the next Session of Parliament, without pointing out that that begins in just two weeks. I am afraid that I think that that, too, is not sensible. It avoids none of the dangers of sending the wrong signals at the wrong time and distracting resources and attention from where they are most needed. Indeed, it risks appearing to set a deadline for our operations in Iraq which would be politically and militarily damaging ...

There have already been two parliamentary Committee reports on Iraq: the Foreign Affairs Committee report, ‘The Decision to go to War in Iraq’, and the Intelligence and Security Committee report, ‘Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction – Intelligence and Assessments’. There have been two further independent reports: the Hutton inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr. David Kelly CMG, and the Butler review of intelligence on weapons of mass destruction. Is this the moment to take a decision and a step of the kind recommended in the motion? My answer is a resounding no. There is absolutely nothing in the unquestionably difficult and delicate situation in Iraq today that makes this the obvious and right time.

**Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Conservative):** So the Foreign Secretary can give a firm commitment to the House that an inquiry will be held as soon as our troops leave?

**Margaret Beckett:** What I am saying to the House, and what I shall say repeatedly, is that this is not the time for making these decisions. I will tell the hon. Gentleman why. Our words in the House today will be heard a very long way away. They can be heard by our troops, who are already in great danger in Iraq. They can be heard by the Iraqi people and by their Government, many of whose

members I know many hon. Members in all parts of the House have met – people whose bravery and fortitude is humbling and who still need our support, not the rehashing of issues that have been gone over umpteen times in the House.

**Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Conservative):** The Foreign Secretary asks why now. What if, God forbid, Parliament has to vote to send our brave armed servicemen and women into war again? We need an inquiry now to ensure that the British people can once again trust the Government. I do not think that that is possible, but I hope that in the House today the Foreign Secretary will agree to an inquiry in order that future wars can be built on trust and on the full backing of Parliament and the people, without mass deception.

**Margaret Beckett:** I do not take any lectures from Conservative Members, who never, ever gave the House a vote about sending troops into action, including on some occasions when I do not necessarily dispute that it was right to send them, including on occasions without United Nations authority.

**Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon) (Conservative):** The Foreign Secretary prayed in aid the [Foreign Affairs] Select Committee's report. I was a member of that Committee, and I have to say to her that her predecessor and the Government obstructed the Committee's proceedings at every stage possible, refusing to produce witnesses and documents.

**Margaret Beckett:** I am sorry; I do not accept that in the slightest, and I shall tell the hon. Gentleman why. I followed – from a slight distance, I concede – many of the discussions and many of the requests from the Select Committee ... I followed those matters as carefully as I could, and I observed – and I observed it from Committee members who had ministerial experience – people asking for papers and for disclosures which they, as former Ministers and experienced Members of the House, would never for a single second have contemplated disclosing. I reject utterly the suggestion that the Committee did not get full support.

**Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab):** Does the Foreign Secretary think I am exceptional, in the sense that not one of my constituents has asked me to press for an inquiry into the causes of the war? However, many of my constituents are troubled about which moves we should make in the best interests of the people of Iraq. Many of them would be appalled at the fact that much of the debate is looking backwards. There will come a time when accounts are settled, but my constituents are desperately concerned about the right moves for the future.

**Margaret Beckett:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who I know is held in high regard in all parts of the House. What he says is also my experience, and I expect that he speaks for Members in all parts of the House who may not all wish to acknowledge it ...

What happens in the House today will be heard not only by those in Iraq – the people and the Government – but by those whose intention it is to do us harm, whether in Iraq or beyond. Again, I ask the House to consider whether now is the time to send a signal – every Member of the House knows in their heart that this is true – which many will undoubtedly interpret as a weakening of our commitment ...

There is an important tradition in the House that all political parties give our troops and are seen to give our troops their full support while they are in conflict. That is a precedent which it would be dangerous to break.

**Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con):** The Foreign Secretary would get rid of the dissention this afternoon and send out a fairly united message if she said that there will be a Franks-type inquiry into the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath as soon as the troops are withdrawn. I cannot understand whether she is saying that she accepts the need for such an inquiry but that the time is not ripe, or whether she is saying in weasel words that we have had enough inquiries already. If she accepted what will be forced on the Government in any event – a Franks-type inquiry when the hostilities have ceased – we would send a united message from this House.

**Margaret Beckett:** I am surprised that the right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot understand what I am saying, because it is clear and simple: today is not the time for making these decisions. [*Interruption.*] ... As for the right hon. and learned Gentleman's contention that a Franks-type inquiry is required, I refer him to the discussion in this House in July 2003 when one of my former colleagues, Mr. Tam Dalyell, who was summoned to give evidence to the Franks inquiry, commented on how inadequate it was ...

It is now more than three years since the Government committed UK forces, as part of an international coalition led by the United States, to military action against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Saddam Hussein had repeatedly and openly defied the authority of the United Nations, and before UN Security Council resolution 1441, which was carried unanimously because of the unanimous conviction that he represented a serious danger to the international community, he already stood in material breach of 17 separate UN resolutions. He refused fully to co-operate with the weapons inspection regime imposed on him as someone who had both possessed and used weapons of mass destruction. The international community as a whole – not just the United States and the UK – believed that he had developed and wished further to develop WMD capability.

**Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington and Chelsea) (Conservative):** Does the Foreign Secretary realise that her opposition to an inquiry into the origins of the Government's policy on Iraq would be more convincing if the Government were not simultaneously bitterly opposing any debate on the future of their policy in Iraq? Is she not ashamed that, in the three years since the war, the Government have not initiated a single debate on the subject in this Chamber? The United

States Congress was permitted a full debate on the matter as recently as June. Is it not appalling that, when the Government have been responsible for such an arrant misuse of their powers, this Chamber has not been allowed to debate the matter?

**Margaret Beckett:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman is talking complete nonsense, as he must be well aware. He is a former Secretary of State for Defence, and he knows that there are five defence debates a year and that there are debates on foreign policy, all of which are in Government time. Of course it is open to people to debate those issues.

**Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford) (Liberal Democrat):** The Foreign Secretary seems to be saying that an inquiry now would be wrong, because our forces are in the field. Indeed, she has accused the Conservative party of never having succumbed to such a debate in the past. How does she answer the historical fact that in May 1940, while British troops were fighting and losing a campaign in Norway, a Conservative Government allowed a debate in this Chamber in which the Labour party, the Liberal party and some notable people from the Conservative party conspired to vote against the Government of the day, which led to the resignation of the then Prime Minister and the installation of a coalition Government? When our troops are in a campaign, that is surely when this House – a democracy – should be allowed to debate their conduct.

**Margaret Beckett:** I did not say the words that the hon. Gentleman has put into my mouth, and I am sorry if he misheard me. I continue to take the view that this is not the time for this debate. Moreover, I have been reminded that the motion to which the hon. Gentleman has referred was taken on the Adjournment and was not a motion to bind the Government of the day ...

The decision to take part in military action was not taken lightly or trivially. In an unprecedented step, it was the subject of a full debate and a vote in this House, which was right. Committing British troops to a war is one of the most solemn decisions that any Government can ever take, but we did so because we judged, and because this House judged – the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price) talked about voices being heard; some 52 Members of this House spoke in that debate – that the threat to international peace and security was very real and very grave. The original decision to take military action provoked fierce debate in this Chamber and across the country, and I have no doubt that it will continue for much time to come; but the decisions we take in the weeks and months to come should surely have as their priority what is best for Iraq and its people, here and now, as well as the impact that any decision we make may have on our troops in the field.

Last December, more than 75 per cent of the Iraqi people elected a new Parliament under a permanent, new constitution; and let us not forget that they did so under threat of death from those who sought only destruction in Iraq. This spring, that Parliament elected a new Government of national unity representing

all Iraq's main political parties, and for the first time in their history the people of Iraq began a bold attempt to share power equitably among the nation's ethnic and confessional populations ...

I do not in any way underestimate the terrible difficulties that many people in Iraq are facing. Many of them have to cope today and every day with the kind of terrorist horror which so profoundly shocked our own country last July. As I have said, their bravery in the face of that threat is humbling. The Iraqi Government, headed by Prime Minister Maliki, are barely five months into their term. From the outset, they have faced a daunting array of political and economic challenges of a kind with which any Government in the world would struggle to deal. Overshadowing all else has been a relentless and rising tide of murderous violence, some of it a very deliberate effort to destroy the fragile foundations of Iraq's democratic system.

**John Baron (Billericay) (Conservative):** Cannot the Foreign Secretary understand that a good part of the deep frustration expressed by this House arises because the Prime Minister refuses to come to this House and lead a debate on current and future policy on Iraq? Given General Sir Richard Dannatt's recent comments, and the fact that the situation seems to be deteriorating, will the Foreign Secretary now encourage the Prime Minister to come to this House and lead a debate?

**Margaret Beckett:** I am sorry, but I do not think that that is what is inspiring the comments and the mood in the House today. Perhaps it would be better if it were, but I do not believe that it is ...

Elsewhere, we have seen a spiral of retaliatory sectarian killings. Here, too, existing ethnic tensions have been carefully exploited by those who have no interest in Iraq becoming a fully functioning state and every interest in dragging it back into chaos and lawlessness. It is this violence that has held up and disrupted the supply of essential services to Iraqis; it is this violence that has meant that the political framework is taking longer to develop; and it is this violence that is holding millions of ordinary Iraqis back from a better future for themselves and their families. That is why Prime Minister Maliki has made tackling the violence his Government's highest priority. We are in Iraq at the express request of that Government and with the full support of the United Nations, and so our responsibility is to support the sovereign Government of Iraq in their objectives.

The Iraqi Government and the coalition forces are currently engaged in a critical attempt to make Baghdad more secure. In Basra, British troops are in the middle of a similarly vital mission to take on the violent extremists and lay the foundations of long-term security. The challenge faced by the Iraqi people in those two cities, as elsewhere in the country, is not purely military. Much of the current violence has political roots and it will be through determined political efforts – led by Iraqis – that it will ultimately be addressed. There can be no substitute for strong political leadership in Iraq. We have strongly supported Prime Minister

Maliki's commitment to national reconciliation and have worked hard to bring all Iraq's political and clerical leaders fully and wholeheartedly behind it, because that offers the best chance of building a consensus among Iraq's divided communities, all of whom are suffering from the current levels of violence, and of isolating those who are trying to drive the Iraqi people further from one another.

At the same time, we are urging Iraq's political leaders to move ahead without delay in taking crucial decisions on the country's future. We are offering strong support for their work to reach agreement by the end of the year on a new law setting out the future of the oil and gas sector, which is central to Iraq's economic regeneration. We are actively encouraging the Iraqi Parliament to pass new legislation – again, by the end of the year – setting out how the militias can be disbanded and reintegrated into society. We are pushing the Iraqi Parliament for a decision on reforms to the process of de-Ba'athification, as well as on how the agreement to review the new constitution will be implemented. Those are all difficult as well as complex issues – otherwise, they would have been solved long ago – but if we get them right, we can create a new, more positive political dynamic in the country.

Prime Minister Maliki wants to make rapid progress towards the Iraqi Government and security forces assuming responsibility for the country's security.

**Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD):** While praising our troops' contribution both in the war and today, will the Foreign Secretary please return to and address the motion?

**Margaret Beckett:** I am explaining why the motion is so profoundly misconceived. The future of Iraq and its people is at stake, and that is what really matters. If the signal sent from the House casts doubt on our support for what is happening in Iraq, for the actions of our coalition forces, and for those who are not in our forces but who are engaged in trying to support the people of Iraq, ultimately, that will be utterly to their disadvantage ...

The Government share the Prime Minister's determination – as, I have no doubt, does every Member of the House – to see responsibility pass to Iraqi police and security forces. That is fundamental to the coalition's strategy for progressively scaling down military support to the Iraqi Government. British soldiers are doing an astounding job in the most difficult of circumstances, as they do whenever and wherever they are called on; so, too, are a large number of British civilians – civil servants, policemen and women, aid workers and many more, many of whom I met in Basra not long ago. I am sure that all Members, whatever their view of the motion, would recognise the bravery and sacrifice of those people. That contribution is essential in support of the future in Iraq.

The new Iraqi army is getting more capable and more confident. It is increasingly non-sectarian. Two of the 10 divisions of that new army have already been transferred to the direct control of the Iraqi Government, and more will follow in the coming months. Therefore, in spite of the violence, we are seeing major strides towards equipping the Iraqi Government with the tools that they

need to protect their people without relying on indefinite help from the international community ...

Two entire provinces, al-Muthanna and Dhi Qar, have already been handed over to Iraqi control, and more will soon follow. In our area of responsibility in the south, we hope that Maysan province will also have been handed over by the end of the year. A central aim of our current efforts in Basra is to get that province to the point where it, too, is ready to be handed over to Iraqi lead security control. We hope that that can be accomplished at some point next spring. We share the hope recently expressed by the commander of the multinational force in Iraq that all 18 provinces can be handed over to Iraqi control by the end of 2007.

**Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con):** This debate is not about the conduct of policy in Iraq now, but about whether we should hold a Select Committee inquiry into the way in which the war has been and will be conducted in future. My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) made the valid point that the inquiry by the Foreign Affairs Committee was thwarted by the Government, which the Foreign Secretary refuted. I would like to quote what the report says –

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. The hon. Gentleman is a very experienced Member of the House and knows that interventions must be brief.

**Margaret Beckett:** On the hon. Gentleman's final point, the inquiry was followed by the Intelligence and Security Committee and the Butler reports, which considered the issues in depth. I would say to him, and to those Opposition Members who have been muttering and grumbling, that what I am talking about – the present position in Iraq – is exactly the point. That position is difficult; we do not dispute that at all. It is also extremely delicate. We are at what could be a turning point in Iraq, and this is not the time to do what the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr did in moving the motion, and rehash all the debates and arguments that have been held over and over again, not only in the House, but in a succession of inquiries ...

We expect the Iraqi Government to request an extension of the UN mandate under which we are currently operating until 2007, and if they ask for ongoing support, we will provide it. I take very seriously, and hold strongly, the view that at this critical juncture, when Iraq's future hangs so clearly in the balance, it would be plainly and simply wrong to heed those who argue for us just to wash our hands of responsibility and walk away.

We have been working hard in recent months with the Iraqi Government and our international partners to develop an international compact for Iraq, modelled on the Afghan compact, so that the international community can provide further involvement and support for the people of Iraq, and we are keen to use that opportunity to encourage its neighbours to engage fully in the country's stabilisation and reconstruction. An important step forward on that initiative was taken at the UN-hosted meeting that I attended in New York on 18 September, and

a further preparatory meeting is taking place in Kuwait today, so critical decisions about the future of Iraq are being taken today even as we debate the issue in the House.

We would, of course, like two of Iraq's neighbours – Iran and Syria – to play a similarly positive role in promoting stability and development, although the Iraqi Government themselves are convinced that at present those two countries are doing precisely the opposite. We will continue to pressure them to take a different approach, but it would be naïve to imagine that that is a straightforward task. I have set out the objectives and strategy that we, our allies and the Iraqis are currently pursuing, and I can see no credible alternative ...

I have said, and we have repeatedly said, that neither our forces nor our civilian support staff will stay in Iraq a day longer than they are needed. For now, however, we are needed, so we stay ...

Some have argued that we should abandon the idea of preserving Iraq's territorial integrity and accept the break-up of the country. I do not believe that it would be in anyone's interest – not the Iraqi people's, not the region's, not our own – to try to partition Iraq's communities. There are no neat divisions in Iraq. Its great cities host a medley of communities. Splitting Iraq's people apart and forcing people to move from their homes would risk bloodshed on a scale far worse even than we see today, but engaging in that argument at all seems to me to miss the crucial point.

Our task in the House and in the country is not to speculate on or to predict what decisions a future Iraqi Government might or might not take. It is to unite now in support of the national Government of Iraq, who were elected by the Iraqi people to govern that country. I believe that those who tabled this motion and those who are considering supporting it have fallen into the same trap of ignoring the imperative of the present difficult situation in Iraq.

I have no doubt that there will come a time when we will want to look at the lessons learned from our full experience in Iraq, just as we have from every other major conflict in the past, but now, I repeat, is not that time. The challenges Iraq faces are, as I have set out today, acute. They will require our undivided attention and focus. Our responsibility to the people of Iraq demands nothing less.

I recognise that Conservative Members have proposed an amendment that suggests a Falklands-type inquiry in the next Session of Parliament. As I have explained, I believe that that is also unwise. Whatever anyone's view of the decisions that were made in 2003 and subsequently, it would be the wrong decision today to divert the time and energy of all those working hard to secure a better future for Iraq. I have to say that I deplore the apparent complete disinterest in the future of Iraq that some Opposition Members have displayed – *[Interruption.]* It would be a waste to divert our energies to a further inquiry ... I hope that all Members will think very carefully indeed before casting their votes tonight. It is all very well to say, as some Opposition Members have said, that it is all right to vote for the motion because they do not really support it. I fear that the parliamentary nuances will be lost on the Government of Iraq, let alone the

wider international community. Furthermore, Conservative Members should reflect on with whom they will be going into the Lobby if they support the motion. Many of those who support the motion have always opposed this action. Before hon. Members decide how to vote tonight, I ask them to weigh very carefully indeed what signals will be sent out.

\* \* \*

*The debate continued for several hours. Jeremy Corbyn made a late contribution before Alex Salmond wound up in support of the motion before the House.*

**Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab):** ...The debate is essential, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price) for securing it in the first place. It is a debate about our role as Members of Parliament in holding the Government and the Executive to account. That is what we are sent here for. That is why people vote in parliamentary elections. If we want to do something to restore people's confidence in the democratic process in this country, we should support the motion at 7 o'clock.

We should do that for several reasons. The inquiries that are necessary into the war in Iraq might spare us involvement in future conflicts. They will open up the books and the record on what happened in the run-up to the war in 2003. In an earlier intervention, I asked the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr about just one example of that. In 2002, the Prime Minister met the President of the United States on several occasions, many summit meetings were held, troops were deployed to the theatre of war, and there were constant reports about the weapons inspectors, who were apparently having success both in ridding Iraq of any weapons of mass destruction or the ability to make them, and in reducing the appalling human rights abuses that Saddam Hussein and his regime had been committing against the people of that country. A serious process was going on.

Using our power in the Security Council, however, we prevented the weapons inspectors from going back into Iraq in January 2003. At the same time, massive public demonstrations took place, including the million-plus march in London and equivalent sized demonstrations in the USA. I had the privilege of attending the one in London, and of attending an enormous one in San Francisco. There was always huge opposition to the war in the USA, and as President Bush is about to find out next week, that opposition has grown a lot bigger. We need answers to that question about the weapons inspectors.

We also need answers to the question of the legality of the war. Let us consider the way in which United Nations Security Council resolution 1441 was constantly prayed in aid by Ministers as a justification for the war. There is no justification for war when no ever-ready, real or present threat existed, when there were no weapons of mass destruction, and when no weapons were going to be fired off at 45 minutes' notice. What we had was a President backed into a corner and troops in theatre, so we had to go for it. The war duly took place.

As other Members have pointed out, since the troops arrived in Iraq, according to *The Lancet*, 650,000 Iraqis, more than 2,000 American soldiers and more than a hundred British soldiers have lost their lives. In my involvement with the Stop the War campaign, I have met many of the families of British soldiers who lost their lives in Iraq. In my constituency, I have also met many Iraqis seeking asylum from both Saddam Hussein and the current situation. None of them praised Saddam Hussein, but all thought that the situation was now more dangerous and worse than when the invasion took place. Those views need to be heard, and the inquiries need to be held ...

I want the motion to be carried so that we establish a committee of inquiry into all the circumstances surrounding the run-up to the war, the aftermath of the war in Iraq and what we do in future. We live in a world where terrorism has been encouraged by the invasion of Iraq, and, I believe, by the continued presence in Afghanistan. If we want to live in a world of perpetual wars throughout this century, we are going the right way about it. If we want to live in a world of peace and justice, we need to examine how we got into this perilous situation, why we are continuing in it, and what we are doing to address the grievances in the world – Palestinian grievances, the gap between rich and poor, and all the other problems facing the planet. That is the way forward. We should examine our consciences and what we have done, and learn the lessons from that.

**Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (Scottish National Party):** It is an enormous pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn), because if I remember correctly he was one of 23 hon. Members who, two years ago, started the campaign to bring parliamentary accountability to the situation. Over those two years, the motion put forward for discussion has changed – it has had to – and tonight 170 Members from both sides of the Chamber, including Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, Independent and Conservative Members, are brought together to endorse the motion before the House.

**Mr. Jim Devine (Livingston) (Labour):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr. Salmond:** I hope that the hon. Gentleman will give me a minute or two to develop my point first. I certainly will not forget him: he signed the early-day motion. I just hope that he has the courage to follow his conscience into the Lobby this evening. No doubt he will tell us in a minute or two.

I pay tribute to the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrat party for their position on the war. It was not so difficult for us to follow through on that position because we are united as parties, but when Labour and Conservative Members differ from their party it may take a great deal of moral courage to go against what their Front-Bench spokesmen say. The fact that the motion is being debated in the House is a demonstration of Back-Bench responsibility. It is the duty of Parliament to hold the Government to account.

Last Wednesday, I remember that the Prime Minister told the hon. Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron) that he would be delighted to debate Iraq in the House 'at any time.' Clearly, tonight was not convenient for the Prime Minister. He would have been well advised to turn up, because the Foreign Secretary did not give him the sort of defence that I would like her to give me, if my conduct was being examined ...

**Mr. Devine:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Let me say to him, in a comradely way, 'You tube', because I have just been watching him on YouTube, where he says:

'On Halloween the ghost of Iraq will return to haunt Blair. The SNP and Plaid Cymru have put down a motion to impeach Blair and hold him to account.'

What is it to be – impeachment or an inquiry?

**Mr. Salmond:** The hon. Gentleman should accept that we ought not to allow the Leader of the Opposition to be the only politician on YouTube. I would not want to condemn the youngsters of this country to such a situation. If the hon. Gentleman had been listening, rather than preparing his question, he would know that I referred to precisely that issue – to the 23 Members, including the hon. Member for Islington, North, who came together to introduce a motion of impeachment. However, it was argued that we should change the motion for two reasons. The first was to broaden the base, because it is not just the Prime Minister who is responsible. Ministers have collective responsibility, and it was Government policy that took us into Iraq. The second reason, as the hon. Gentleman probably knows even though he is relatively new, was that the process of impeachment is a trial in Parliament by the House of Lords. Given what I found out recently about the complexion of Members in the House of Lords, I now think that Members of the House of Commons are the right people to hold such an inquiry. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Gentleman.

I am glad to see that the Foreign Secretary has returned to her place. Earlier, she made the extraordinary proposition that it was not the right time to hold an inquiry. Apparently, we can allow an inquiry by Lord Butler and Lord Hutton when our troops are in the field, but not a parliamentary inquiry. What kind of argument is that? I know that the Foreign Secretary only recently took up her post, and perhaps she is not yet fully in command of her brief, but when she was asked a direct question by the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) – a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee – about its inquiry, she said that there had been no Government obstruction of that inquiry. That is remarkable, because I have before me the title of the first special report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which reads 'Implications for the Work of the House and its Committees of the Government's Lack of Co-operation with the Foreign Affairs Committee's Inquiry into the Decision to Go to War in Iraq'. If the Foreign Secretary wants to be a success in her position and to defend the Prime Minister,

she should familiarise herself with the work of that Select Committee.

I was interested to hear the Foreign Secretary pray in aid my old friend Tam Dalyell against the Franks committee. I am in no doubt whatever about which Lobby Tam Dalyell would go into this evening, if he were still in the House. There are three basic arguments for the motion. The first concerns parliamentary accountability. It is pretty unprecedented in recent times, but the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir Peter Tapsell) reminded me that Lord Liverpool, in 1855, fell on just such a motion –

**Sir Peter Tapsell:** Lord Aberdeen.

**Mr. Salmond:** Yes, it was Lord Aberdeen who, in 1855, fell on just such a motion, but I do not think that the hon. Gentleman is claiming to have personal knowledge of that debate. Nonetheless, we should be reminded by history that it is not unprecedented for a motion to have such results. I have listened to every word of this debate, unlike the Foreign Secretary, and so can say that we should have such debates more often in the House, because they do us enormous credit. The debate is on current events in Iraq, as well as the history of the war. That is why the motion refers to the war ‘and its aftermath’.

**Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr. Salmond:** I will, in a second or two.

The Foreign Secretary shook her head when my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price), who moved the motion, suggested that she had admitted that historians might judge the Iraqi adventure a foreign policy disaster. I have with me the transcript of her interview on BBC Radio 4. Asked whether historians might ultimately conclude that the war was a ‘foreign policy disaster’ for Britain, the Foreign Secretary replied:

‘Yes, they may. Then again, they may not.’

**Margaret Beckett:** I am reluctant to intervene, but what the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price) actually claimed was that I had said that the war was a disaster. I did not say that; I would never say that, and I am sick and tired of journalists putting words into my mouth, as they so frequently do.

**Mr. Salmond:** Asked whether historians would judge Iraq to have been a ‘foreign policy disaster’, the Foreign Secretary said:

‘Yes, they may. Then again, they may not.’

She will forgive us if that does not fill the House with confidence about her confidence in the policy on Iraq. She should accept that Members may judge, before historians do, whether the policy has been a disaster. Members might

sometimes offer the Government some wisdom that could change the situation and – who knows? – alter the course of events and save lives ... the third reason for supporting the motion concerns what happens if the same circumstances arise in future. Surely we should look to the future. What happens if there is another conflict that the House is misled into supporting, and if we are bounced into another Iraq? The back-stop of full, parliamentary accountability will make any Government, and any Prime Minister, think again before taking the course that the Prime Minister took.

**Clare Short:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we do not have an exit strategy on Iraq, and that the chaos can continue for many years to come? Does he agree that if we are to decide on an exit strategy, we first need to know why we were there, and does he agree that we should not accede to the American aspiration to set up permanent bases, which will almost certainly mean a permanent insurgency?

**Mr. Salmond:** I agree with the right hon. Lady. I understand that she was at the Cabinet table when the decisions were being made, and I respect her opinion. Her doubts carry a great deal of credibility – perhaps more credibility than the words of the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett). He accused my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr of impugning the motives of the Attorney-General. I read the former Home Secretary's memoirs only a few days ago, and, as I understand it, they suggest that the Chancellor of the Exchequer may have fallen in behind the Prime Minister only because he was frightened of losing his job. When it comes to impugning motives, my hon. Friend can take lessons from the former Home Secretary.

**Jim Sheridan:** Those of us who know the hon. Gentleman from his work in Scotland know that he is a straight-talking guy, so before Members from both sides of the House go into the Lobby, can he tell us, unequivocally, whether he has said today that the motion is about the impeachment of the prime Minister? Can he answer that question?

**Mr. Salmond:** The motion began as an impeachment motion. [Hon. Members: 'Answer!'] We tabled the motion that appears on the Order Paper to secure maximum unity across the House. It is concerned with parliamentary responsibility and accountability. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman read it and follow his conscience by joining us in the Lobby.

Many of us remember the debate on Iraq in which the Prime Minister said that it was 'palpably absurd' not to believe that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. He told us that he had never made the argument for regime change when defending the decision to invade Iraq. He has made that argument many times since the invasion, because clearly he can no longer make the argument about weapons of mass destruction. Those are not matters of opinion, but of fact – we know that there were not any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq,

and that the American justification that al-Qaeda was involved was tenuous at best. There was no connection with 9/11 to justify the invasion and the casualty toll as a result of the action is a matter of fact: 120 British soldiers and 2,821 American soldiers are dead. Tens of thousands – perhaps hundreds of thousands – of Iraqi civilians are dead. Those are the consequences of the decision by the House.

Suez was raised a number of times in our debate, but casualties there did not approach the total that I have just given the House. Certainly, lives were lost, but not to the extent that they have been lost in Iraq – 16 British soldiers were lost at Suez, every one a tragedy; 1,650 Egyptians were killed, every one a tragedy. Compared with the consequences that have befallen us in Iraq, however, Suez is as nothing. Yesterday, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a campaign to save the world from climate change. They have spent \$5 billion in Iraq and the Americans have spent \$200 billion. What if those resources had been devoted to saving the planet, rather than starting an illegal war?

Finally, our genuinely cross-party motion provides a chance to achieve parliamentary accountability. It is an opportunity for the House of Commons to live up to our constituents' expectations. It has been said that our soldiers would be discouraged if the motion were agreed, but they would be discouraged only if they thought that the House had forgotten them and was frightened to debate the implications of Iraq. They would be discouraged if they thought that Members were not prepared to table motions or consider how we can get out of the morass into which we have been led.

It is the Government who refuse to debate or introduce policies, but it is the House of Commons, by voting in the Division Lobbies tonight, that can finally hold them to account.

'Why is it the Scottish National Party that is making the running on so many issues in Westminster right now? What are the other 644 members of Parliament doing? I think we should be told.

It was the SNP MP Angus Brendan MacNeil who made the original complaint to the Metropolitan Police over those secret loans from subsequently ennobled businessmen. That action has provoked a crisis within No. 10, and brought to light a corrupt system which has not only made Lords reform inevitable, but has also raised serious questions about the integrity of the Prime Minister.

It was an SNP motion calling for an inquiry into Iraq which brought the government within 25 votes of defeat in the Commons. That was an inspired move ...

The SNP have tabled another ingenious motion, this time to the Queen's Speech. The amendment calls on the government to deliver a statement and a vote on an exit strategy from Iraq. Kenneth Clarke, the former Chancellor, has no problems in supporting the SNP motion on the Queen's Speech. So why haven't opposition MPs been engaging in creative proceduralism ...?'

*Iain Macwhirter, The Guardian, 14 November 2006*