

Clear and Accountable?

Institutions for Defence and Security

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Defence and Security Group

This paper represents the consensus of a continuing series of private seminars held at intervals over the past three years. In addition to the authors, those participating included Sir Mark Allen, Vice-Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, Admiral The Lord Boyce, Chris Donnelly, Field Marshal The Lord Inge, Tom Kremer, Lord Leach, Baroness Park of Monmouth, Professor Gwyn Prins, and Professor Hew Strachan.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary This paper forms part of the work of the Defence and Security Group¹. It focuses on the United Kingdom's institutional arrangements for developing defence and security strategy. These arrangements should be clear and simple, and should provide for proper accountability of Government to Parliament rather than tending vainly towards technocracy. Why has the Prime Minister's proposed Joint Committee to scrutinise the National Security Strategy not been set up, almost a year after first being proposed? A mapping of current Whitehall arrangements for defence and security, in particular relating to the Ministerial Committee on National Security, International Relations & Development (NSID), reveals those arrangements to be both over-complicated and opaque. We cannot believe that they are efficient.

The Government's counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST is typical in that it lacks focus. The introduction of the Public Service Agreement (PSA) process into the CONTEST arrangements, reading across to the recent National Audit Office *Assessment of the Cabinet Office Capability Review programme*, is an example of how the Government's assessment and management processes obscure more than they reveal, with no evidence that they work. Defence procurement too is in a mess; the Defence Committee has pointed this out; does the PSA system actually contribute anything to identifying or solving the problem

We make three recommendations:

- The proposed Joint Committee should be set up without further delay.
- A simplified Committee structure within the Cabinet Office should be established along lines we describe.
- Government should focus on its executive functions more directly, pruning its management processes ruthlessly, and leave to Parliament the task of scrutiny and assessment.

Work should also be begun at once, by bi-partisan agreement, on the Defence Review that is urgently needed, granted the changed economic circumstances of recent months and patent problems of recent years.

¹ The Group has held a continuing series of private seminars at intervals over the past three years. In addition to the authors, those participating have included those members mentioned on the title paper.

Preamble: The Primacy of Parliament

This paper argues for a small but significant measure of Parliamentary reform to provide for greater accountability of Government to Parliament in defence and security strategy. We propose in particular the establishment of a Joint Committee of both Houses. This is along lines proposed by the Prime Minister and agreed to by the Leader of the Opposition almost a year ago, but unaccountably not yet implemented. We also argue for a simplification of the machinery and processes of Government so as to make Government both more efficient and more accountable to Parliament.

We make these proposals out of a fixed and long-held conviction that Parliament should play a greater part in developing the United Kingdom's defence and security strategy, reasserting thereby its primary function: which is to hold Government to account.

We originally outlined our proposals before the present Parliamentary crisis exploded. Yet we hold by our conviction. We think, before setting out the rest of our argument, it is important to reiterate our ultimate faith in Parliamentary institutions. If not Parliament, then who should be the arbiter of these things, and where should national effort come together? Do we really want yet another Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) – or quango – purporting to fill that role?

Parliament is now being forced to examine itself. This paper cannot offer a blueprint for the renewal of Parliament, but we believe our proposals would make a contribution in an area which should be the prime concern of both Parliament and Government. We have been accused of harking back to a mythical golden age.² But in our system there can be no strong Government without a strong Parliament, and those in politics and Government who do not recognize that fact are not only constitutionally naïve but actually dangerous. It takes more than lobby fodder and glorified social workers to transact the Queen's business

² We have rebutted that accusation elsewhere. "It feels somehow jejune to point it out, but the House of Commons is the only directly elected national institution in the United Kingdom. If Westminster is not the cockpit of our national political life, then that life is doubly removed from ordinary people. Our political nation can live its busy life elsewhere – in Brussels, all too often – and merely pass its decisions to Westminster for rubber-stamping. In doing so, it will grow ever more distant from everyone else, and its decisions will mean less and less."

"Defence and security are too important to risk that. The complexity and self-awareness of modern society means that people cannot simply be told what to do. Government has to work with what people are willing to do. The model is a conversation, not a directive." *RUSI Journal* Feb 2009, Vol 154, No 1, Letters. We would only add that now, just four months later, it does *not* feel jejune to point this out, but horribly necessary.

properly. It may have seemed clever to turn Parliament into a backwater, but the result stinks.

We reassert Edmund Burke's classic distinction between representation and delegation:³ parliamentarians are not delegates, reflecting the wishes of their electors; and still less are they merely a standing electoral college lending legitimacy to the Government of the day. They are representatives, and they owe it to their electors to use their own judgment, as best they can in every sense.

We therefore continue to believe that Parliament should be stronger. But only parliamentarians can make it so, by holding Government to account on behalf of all of us: it cannot be done by PR campaigns, or new systems of voting, or educational outreach to teach citizenship, or reforms to whatever 'system' is this month's excuse for people failing.

Parliament's way back to public, and indeed self-, respect is by applying itself to its proper job and re-asserting itself at the heart of our public life. We recognise that many parliamentarians have never lost their dedication to that role, but they have not been in the ascendant. We hope they fight their way back there in the months to come.

For our part, from outside Parliament, we make our proposals in order to contribute to making Parliament what it has been in the past, and should be in the 21st century: that is, the strong and respected centre of our national life. We believe and trust that the whole nation wants that too.

Introduction

Better strategic provision is needed for the defence and security of the United Kingdom.⁴ We advocate both a rigorous approach to the analysis of risks and threats to the United Kingdom, and an institutional structure for the development of defence and security strategy that is appropriate to our parliamentary system of government. To put it another way, our interests cover not only the 'what' of national security strategy, but also the 'how' – that is, how effort should be organised and overseen.

³ Edmund Burke, 'Appeal to the Bristol Electors 13th Oct. 1774', in Paul Langford, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Oxford, 1966, vol. III, p. 61

⁴ The Group has published proposals to this end before. *RUSI Journal* February 2008, Vol 153 No. 1, pp. 22-27. These proposals met with widespread comment and considerable agreement.

The present paper develops our thinking on the ‘how’. This is in no way to underrate the challenges of the ‘what’, or the importance of work in that area. We identify six categories of risk: “that geo-strategic fundamentals do not change, but new forces are at power within them”; that “the old surfs the new”; that “there is new competition for resources”; that “the politics of climate represent unexpected pressures”; that “the problem of Russia is re-emerging”; and that “multilateral institutions are weakening”.

The world has moved on at a crashing pace since early 2008. Indeed, it is our conviction, supported by many we have spoken to, that by bi-partisan agreement work should begin immediately on a full-scale and radical Defence and Security Review. Our proposed changes to the machinery of government should enable this to be an open process, assist in winning it general consent, and therefore help materially in its implementation.

We believe we have, however, been right to direct what resources we have to work on the institutional end of our proposals: to how Westminster and Whitehall function in terms of strategic analysis and provision. Whilst no-one can yet know whether the present world recession is just that, or whether it represents a shift in the tectonic plates of the world order with all that that entails for defence and security strategy, time spent now on getting our own arrangements in order is surely time well spent.

Clear and Accountable

Our institutional proposals

Our institutional proposals are binary: on the one hand, a single Cabinet committee, chaired by a senior member of the Cabinet whose principal task in government this would be (and who might therefore hold one of the so-called sinecure posts), and which would be supported by a single powerful Cabinet Office secretariat; and on the other, a Parliamentary Joint Committee to scrutinise, support and – where necessary – stimulate government action towards proper provision for defence and security.

Some commentators have suggested that such a Joint Committee might engender too cosy a consensus. We acknowledge the force of this point, but believe it to be misjudged: the common interest of all parties in defence and security, combined with the long lead-times in strategic planning, require not only a forum for debate and – as appropriate – dissent, but also the capacity to produce coherence and consistency.

Institutional clarity and simplicity

Institutional arrangements should be clear, so that they are well understood. This is crucial for the resilience of our society. The public need not – indeed, they cannot – know everything that is being done, but they must know that it *is* being done, and consent to it, and their consent will depend on their knowing how it is being organised and who is overseeing it on their behalf. That principle of representative democracy needs to be embodied in the anatomy of government, not only in the dry bones of the constitution but in the soft tissue of everyday Westminster and Whitehall life.

It is also important that arrangements should be flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances without change being needed to the machinery of government. Constant rearrangement of Whitehall furniture is more confusing to outsiders than to insiders: which is something insiders should perhaps bear in mind more than they do.

Accountability is perhaps an over-used word these days. We discuss below some of the efforts that the Government has made to be seen to be accountable by setting up apparently objective systems that demonstrate – or purport to demonstrate – effectiveness. This seems to us a vain attempt at technocracy, or government as a professional function where expertise counts for more than consent. Expertise is of course vital, but as the servant not the master. The decisions have to be made by politicians accountable to the electorate through Parliament.

This is in no way to underrate the role of the media in holding Government and indeed Parliament to account, or indeed the many ways in which government in the widest sense has become – and must become – directly open to the electorate via the internet. Nevertheless, political power and the right to hold office still flow through Parliament, and Parliament therefore remains the focus of accountability in our system of government.

Preserving our life and liberty is inseparable from preserving our Parliamentary institutions, and where necessary, renovating and developing them. Nothing should be done in the name of security to undermine the supremacy of Parliament and its ability to hold Government to account. That would be, in the well-worn Vietnam phrase, to destroy the village in order to save it.

We also do not underrate in any way the work of the departmental Select Committees, and indeed of the Intelligence and Security Committee. They are crucial players in ensuring accountability to Parliament. We believe their place in

the system is well established and well understood. They are, however, concerned with discrete institutions and so cannot necessarily provide an overview of how the efforts of the different Departments are being co-ordinated.

Westminster: the Prime Minister's proposed Joint Committee

We therefore support the Prime Minister's Written Statement of 22 July 2008⁵ on the establishment of a sessional Joint Committee to consider and report on the National Security Strategy. He proposed that the membership of the Joint Committee should include *ex officio* the chairmen of the key departmental Select Committees, and other Members of Parliament and Peers with particular interests or experience. We understand that the Opposition agree to this, and we look forward to the laying of the necessary Motions in both Houses. We do not understand the delay.

The Prime Minister's proposal should not be allowed to lie fallow: this must not be an example of the genus of Joint Committee as long grass. It will be a large Committee, and it is too early to know whether it will meet often enough to ensure continuity and effectiveness, but it was and is a good initiative – unless it remains merely that.

Whitehall

Westminster's scrutiny must allow Whitehall room to get on with its job without every move being second-guessed to destructive effect. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of Whitehall's machinery is a matter for Westminster and for commentators. To propose new arrangements as we have done is implicitly to criticise existing ones. This is too important a subject for partisan politics or for glib criticism, particularly since some of those implicitly or anonymously criticised will have no opportunity to respond. We take everyone's good faith as axiomatic, from the Prime Minister down the chain of responsibility, and we recognise that those involved are working under great pressure in this changing and challenging world.

On that understanding, we wanted to know what the present system was, and we therefore embarked on the exercise of mapping in some detail Whitehall's arrangements for co-ordinating defence and security. We did this partly on the principle that reform is most efficient if it is based on what already exists and can be adapted. However, we also wanted to do it because a number of insiders had told us that they did not know how the various parts of the Whitehall machine were connected; or, worse, that they did not know how – or even whether – their

⁵ Commons Hansard Col. 112WS

work was linked into the overall effort. What is needed is a structure that provides clarity, consistency and coherence across strategic planning, operational experience and delivery, where all inform each other. That is what we have looked to find in our present arrangements. We have looked to a great extent in vain.

Cabinet government and collective Cabinet responsibility provide the long-standing and well-understood mechanism for providing coherent and consistent government. Cabinet government should indeed be well suited to a world where the traditional spheres of home and foreign affairs now intersect or are even in some areas of policy indistinguishable. Abroad has come home: events in Georgia threaten our central heating, and conditions in Pakistan have consequences in Bradford. We, however, fear that the essential clarity of Cabinet government has been muddled by a decade of constant reorganisation, by *démarches* from the centre, and by layer upon layer of reactive initiatives and modish management in the name of efficiency and accountability.

The following charts (Figures 1-6) attempt to map some at least of the structures that exist at the moment. We are *not* publishing a classic chart of Cabinet government, where departments of state each relate to the Cabinet, since our point is that that chart is axiomatic: all citizens understand it (or should do), and this is not a primer on Cabinet government. What we are presenting is an overlay on, or deviation from, that classic model, focusing very largely on activity in and around the Cabinet Office.

Our charts have been extensively reviewed. Indeed, we showed them to everyone we spoke to. They are nevertheless incomplete, so we stress that this remains a work in progress. Everyone we spoke to made adaptations: there is no authoritative version. We find this significant in itself.

Some – even some who have been in government relatively recently – have been surprised (if not shocked) by the complexity presented here. Others were not so much surprised as resigned or discouraged. Indeed, we asked ourselves whether simply to publish the charts would make our point, which is that a Byzantine complexity now seems to obtain in Whitehall, producing a system focused on inward control rather than outward effectiveness. That system is hard to understand, to put it mildly. Some brief attempt at comment and analysis may therefore be helpful, if only to stimulate debate and provoke correction.

NSID

We suspect that what may be going wrong is at least partly located around the Ministerial Committee on National Security, International Relations & Development (NSID), which is chaired by the Prime Minister, together with the activities to support NSID in the Cabinet Office: just where we would want to see one strong secretariat to serve one strong committee *not* chaired by the Prime Minister.

NSID has apparently replaced the Defence and Overseas Policy (DOP) Committee of the previous administration; which, we guess, was the successor to the OPD Committee of the Major administration. Each Prime Minister of course remakes not only the Cabinet, but also the structure of Cabinet committees served by the Cabinet Office. A sign of this is that, by convention, the names of Cabinet Committees change with each new administration, even where a Committee is to all intents and purposes a continuance of its predecessor. This has merit in promoting both flexibility and the new Prime Minister's freedom of action, while maintaining continuity with previous arrangements. On the other hand, and especially where a new Prime Minister takes over from a predecessor of the same party within the life of a Parliament, the resulting arrangements can be something of a palimpsest, and consequently hard to decipher. Figures 1 and 2 present two rather different expressions – both basically emanating from the Government itself – of NSID's function.

Figure 1: NSID's relationship to Foreign and Defence Departments

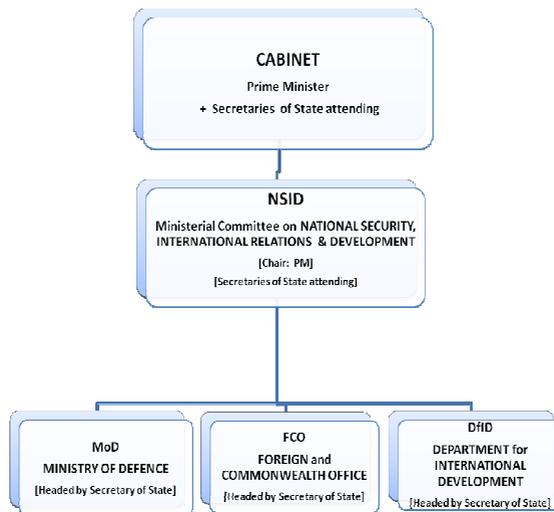
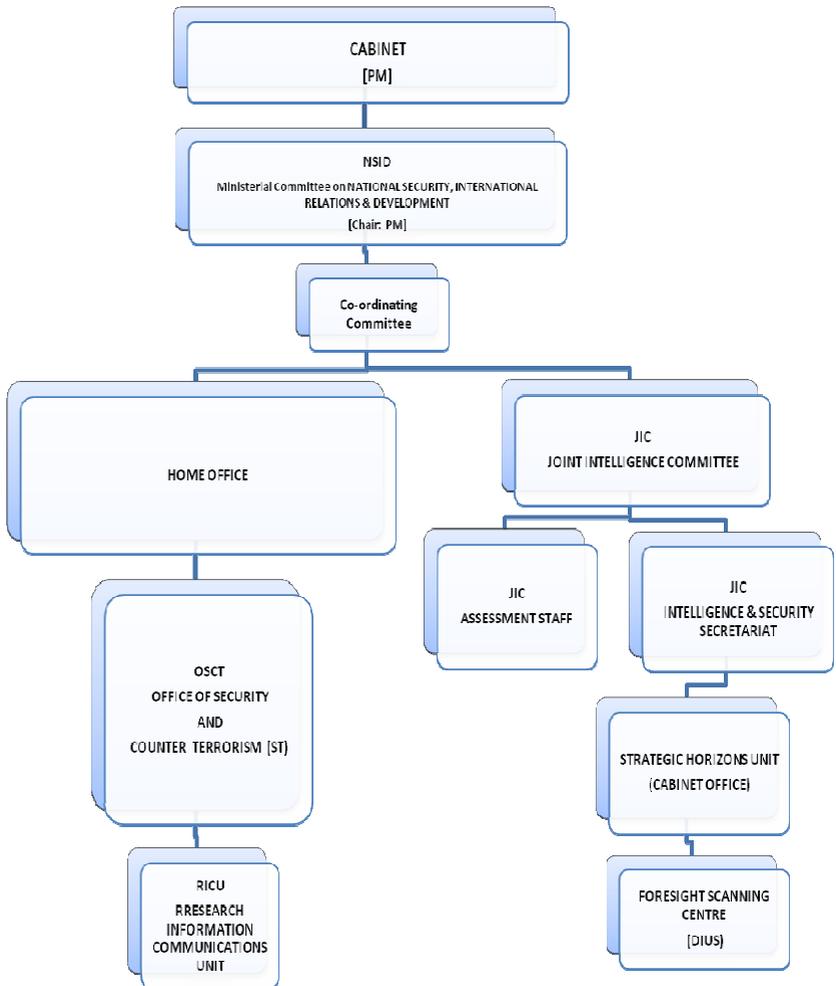


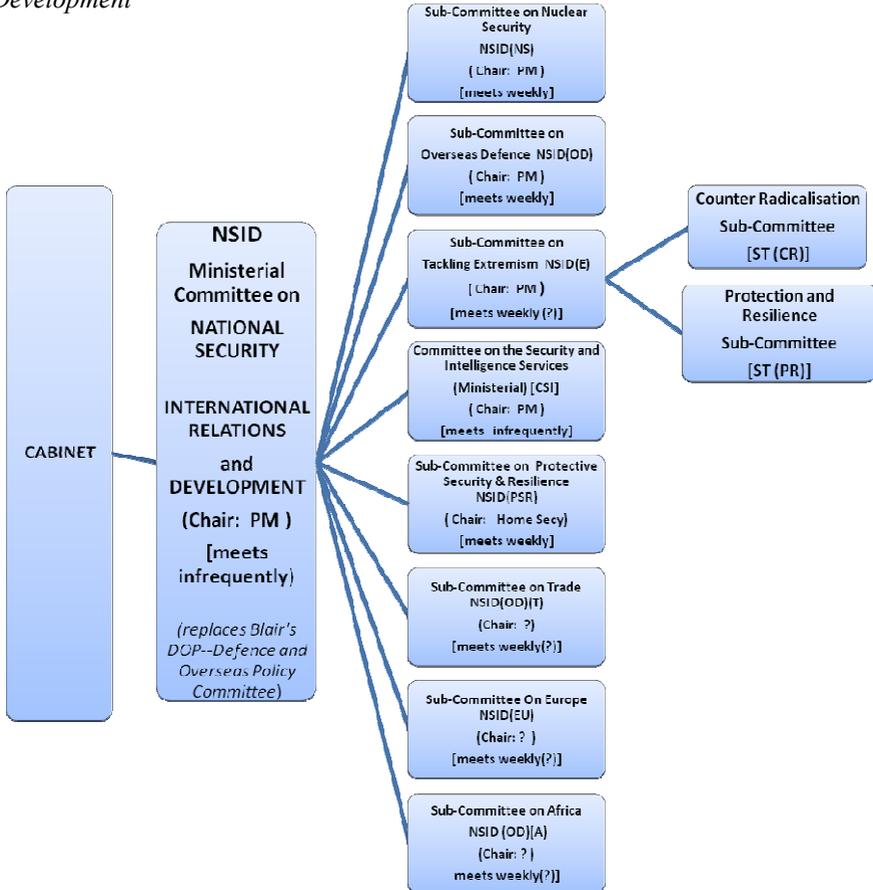
Figure 2: Structure for NSID's intelligence assessment



Read together these charts make NSID very powerful within both domestic and foreign policy. As we understand it, however, NSID meets infrequently, and almost all its business is transacted by correspondence. While this is in accordance with long-standing Whitehall practice, it has the effect of reducing most members to merely reacting, and leaves almost all control with the chairman and secretariat. NSID has at least 8 sub-committees on topics ranging from Trade, Europe, and Africa to Nuclear Security, Overseas Defence, and Tackling

Extremism, many apparently also chaired by the Prime Minister, and which are supposed to meet weekly. This seems a curious use of sub-committees: not delegation, but fragmentation of effort. Figure 3 presents this.

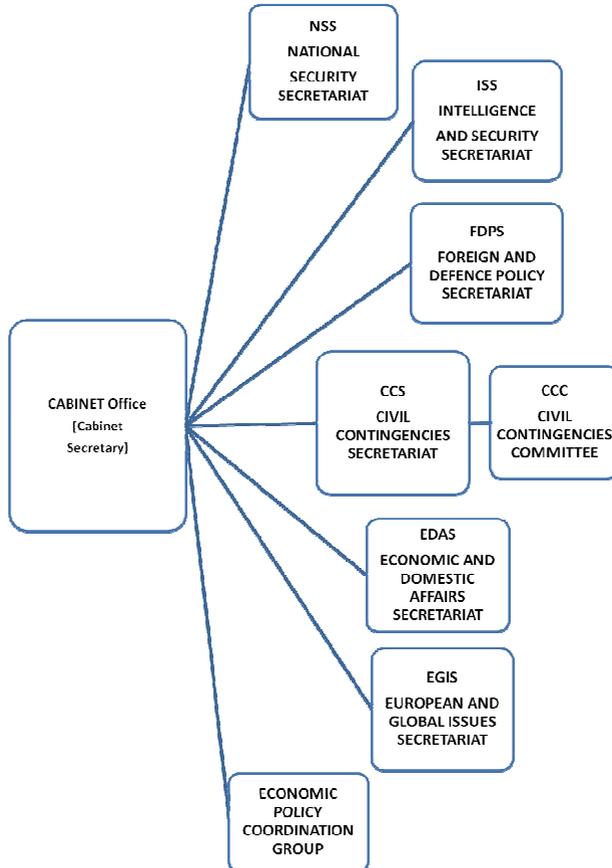
Figure 3: Ministerial Committee on National Security, International Relations and Development



On the showing of this chart, it is hard to see how NSID differs very much from the Cabinet itself, apart from meeting less frequently. Is Cabinet not the place to bring all this together? Or could NSID not meet regularly to bring it all together in preparation for Cabinet? And how far is NSID clearing by correspondence matters that ought to be cleared by the Cabinet itself, even though by correspondence? Or are both things happening in a fog of paper and emails? And how is NSID served? A relatively simple principle has historically governed the

workings of the Cabinet Office: it provides the secretariats that serve Cabinet committees, and in principle there is one secretariat for one committee, or group of committees. At the risk of being obvious, it is perhaps worth stressing this. No committee can function without a secretariat. But the following chart suggests that there may be secretariats that are not serving committees, or are competing in servicing NSID's functions.

Figure 4: Secretariats, Groups and Committees, under Cabinet Office jurisdiction

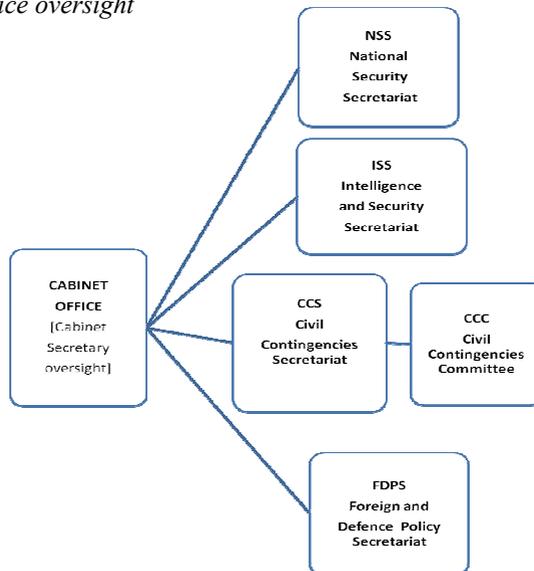


A constant risk with activity in the Cabinet Office is that, if it is not consciously and constantly directed towards co-ordinating and promoting collective Cabinet responsibility, it does the exact opposite: it sets up alternative centres of power away from the departments and the ministers who are directly responsible. The

Cabinet Office has in fact developed other instruments, whose functions sometimes escape the uninitiated and initiated alike. Where do the various ‘units’ fit into government? One must remember that these are in addition to all the departmental bodies with responsibility for matters within that particular department’s own remit; and of course No. 10 has its own special and expert advisers operating across government.

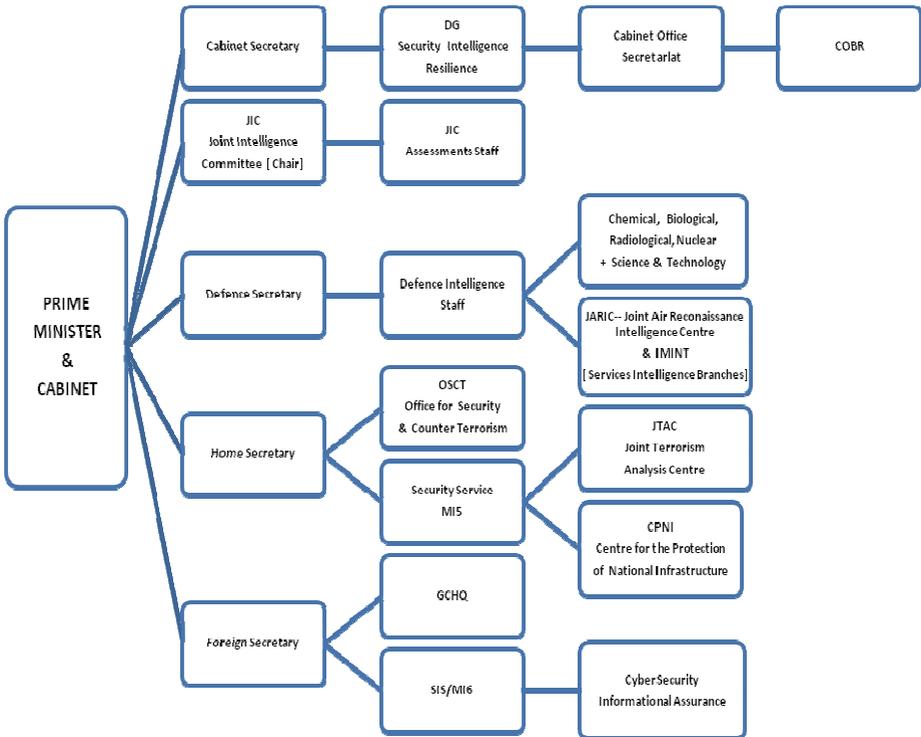
An example of at least potentially damaging division of control and accountability may paradoxically be with the management of the new Single Intelligence Account, which manages the budget for all the security services. In one sense this makes sense, since the product of the intelligence services is co-ordinated by the Joint Intelligence Committee, based in the Cabinet Office. Control of any budget is however a powerful management tool, and we wonder how this division of responsibility for giving direction to the intelligence services is actually working out in practice. We note that the Cabinet Office has a number of secretariats concerned with the work of the intelligence services: how are they co-ordinated at a ministerial level? The following chart (Figure 5) – which is in some sense an edited version of Chart 4 – shows those secretariats.

Figure 5: Secretariats with specific remit for Defence, Security and Intelligence under Cabinet Office oversight



We would also point out that the different intelligence agencies remain attached to different departments, as in the next chart (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Ministerial and Departmental responsibility for Intelligence Services



All this is an extremely complex picture, and we wonder how it does not represent duplication of effort, and of meetings. It may be an intricately interconnected structure. It may be just a mess. We repeat that we embarked on this investigation because people within the machine have suggested that they had no idea how their work connected to the rest of the machine.

And of course organisational structures and flow-charts and organograms have their limitations as guides to the actual workings or the health of institutional organisms. Anatomical charts can only represent bodies, not life itself. On the other hand, it does not follow that the converse is true: that chaos is evidence of abundant and efficient life. There may be, locked away somewhere – in the desk of the Cabinet Secretary, in the bosom of the Prime Minister, or in a safe at

McKinsey & Co – a complete and perfect blueprint of how everything works at present. We wish they would share it more widely, and more intelligibly.

*CONTEST (Pursue Prevent Protect Prepare – The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering International Terrorism)*⁶

It is not that the Government does not publish a great deal of information. An example of this is the publication, in March this year, of CONTEST: This is the first time the Government’s counter-terrorism strategy has been published.

Publication of this sort may seem an entirely laudable effort towards that contemporary cardinal virtue “transparency”. However, it can also seem like a blinding blizzard of paper signifying very little. How many resources are diverted to preparing the strategy in a form fit to be published, and how is publication actually useful in forwarding the strategy?

We are not in a position to give a detailed critique of CONTEST. It is nothing if not comprehensive: indeed, its very universality seems to deny real strategic focus.

“Delivery of the CONTEST Strategy requires close cooperation between a wide range of organisations and stakeholders: local authorities, Government Departments, Devolved Administrations, the police, security and intelligence agencies, emergency services and the Armed Forces and international partners and multilateral organisations. CONTEST also depends on the expertise and knowledge held by communities, industry and the third sector.” (Paragraph 0.64)

CONTEST is overseen at ministerial level by NSID – which, as we have already noted, rarely meets – and it can also draw on the new National Security Forum, “an independent body of outside advisers with expertise on many aspects of national security.” (Paragraph 0.62) We are concerned that the National Security Forum should not become, or be seen as, an *ad hoc* substitute for the proposed Joint Committee.

The Office of Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT) in the Home Office, established in March 2007, leads the co-ordination of CONTEST, including work with police forces and other emergency services. OSCT has, however, since then had two of its dependent sub-committees – on Counter Radicalisation and Protection and Resilience – transferred to the NSID structure (see Figure 3), as sub-committees of the NSID Sub-Committee on Tackling Extremism.

⁶ Cm. 7547

CONTEST comes complete with its own range of management tools, which are almost bewildering in their complexity. They include – for the first time – a Public Service Agreement (PSA) for counter-terrorism work (Paragraph 0.64), overseen “by the CONTEST Board, chaired by the Director General OSCT in his capacity as CONTEST Senior Responsible Owner (SRO). Representatives from key Departments and agencies attend the Board; governance arrangements are maintained by the CONTEST Portfolio Office.” (Paragraph 0.65)

The above quotations are from the executive summary: the extended text goes into far more of this sort of detail, and sets out a welter of “objectives” for the four “workstreams”, all of which will then be measured in the detailed assessment of the strategy. We cannot help fearing that implementation of this strategy will lead, not to simplification or efficiency, but to an even greater proliferation of committees and monitoring meetings: proxies for the necessary action, rather than the thing itself. It may be to invite accusations of Luddism, but we feel like the small children in the crowd who cannot appreciate the Emperor’s New Clothes – or can appreciate them only too well.

In February this year Sir David Omand published a paper (*The National Security Strategy: Implications for the UK intelligence community: A discussion paper for the ippr Commission for the 21st Century*).⁷ He gives an authoritative and enlightening description of how intelligence is and should be gathered and used in the United Kingdom, together with charts and analysis.

His paper, however, goes wider than its title suggests to an analysis of how the relationship of all those concerned with national security has become both more open and more complex. Indeed, he implicitly, if not explicitly, makes the point that many more people and institutions are now on the front line: whether because they have the raw material of intelligence, or need the product of analysis of wider sources of intelligence, many of which are in fact in the public domain.

He also makes the point that many more agencies are involved in balancing the needs of security against other vital principles of our society, such as the freedom of the individual from intrusion. This means that many more people and bodies are involved in the ethical judgments that have to be taken in knowing where covert operations must invade the freedom of the innocent to gather information about those who pose a threat. The boundaries of the national security state are now potentially almost limitless. They certainly go beyond national boundaries.

⁷ <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports>

It is hard to see how it could be otherwise: but that – we would suggest – makes the argument for institutional clarity and coherence more compelling still.

It is concomitantly hard to see how the needs of security and the needs of an open society can be held in a healthy tension without, on the one hand, robust debate, and on the other hand, clear institutional structures that both focus that debate and take the necessary decisions arising from it. The Government's aim, in their snowstorm of publication and consultation, might almost be the opposite: obfuscation and blinding with apparent science.

Assessment and Accountability

Also published in February this year, by the National Audit Office (NAO), which is of course a Parliamentary body, was an *Assessment of the Cabinet Office Capability Review programme*.⁸ This was therefore an assessment of an assessment process.

If one has the patience to begin to read across from publication to publication, evidence of incoherence and failure begins to accumulate. For example, we note the latest findings of “delivery capability scores and reported delivery performance” (p. 26) relating to the period covered by the first round of the Capability Review, July 2006 to December 2007. These are hair-raising. For example, the Ministry of Defence rated at under 20 percent.

The second round of the Capability Review is scheduled to be completed in July 2009. It is again unclear to us that the Capability Review will have led to better management of departments, or only to improvement in hitting the indicators – the targets – set up as proxies for the elaborate purposes of the process. There is a clash of cultures here. Supporters of the Capability Review will no doubt point out that the first round only proved how much work there was to do: work that the second round may demonstrate has been – or is being – done.

That may be. Yet we are sobered by paragraphs such as the following (also p. 26):

“PSAs may be of varying weights. For example, the Ministry of Defence regards its PSA on achieving Ministers’ objectives for operations and military tasks in which UK armed forces are involved as by far the most important of its SR2004 PSAs. It met this PSA despite deteriorating conditions in Iraq and the challenge of a simultaneous deployment in

⁸ *HC 123 Session 2008-2009*, 5 February 2009

Afghanistan. It did so in the knowledge that as a consequence the target for peace time readiness was very unlikely to be met”.

How does the MoD PSA about peace-time readiness relate to the new CONTEST PSA?

Perhaps we may read across again, to another Parliamentary paper. The House of Commons Defence Committee found, in its Defence Equipment Report 2009 – again published in February 2009 – that Defence Equipment & Support (DE&S) in its first year “failed to meet its PSA target to ‘deliver the equipment programme to cost and time’”⁹. Did we need the apparatus of PSAs to tell us this?

PSAs are supposed to be quasi-contracts – proxies for contracts – for the public interest in the delivery of public services. But they lack the key element of contracts: enforceability and redress for failure to deliver. They deploy a panoply of pseudo-market methodology to state – or evade – the obvious, which is that defence procurement is in a mess. The Defence Committee is there to point that out, on the part of Parliament, and it is hereby doing so. Is the Government listening? And how much effort at the highest level of the armed forces (engaged in two wars) has actually gone into deploying the panoply of PSAs for this inadequate result? That is not to mention the 28,000 MoD civil servants who work on procurement (as the Shadow Defence Secretary, Dr Liam Fox, pointed out in his Politeia Spring Address¹⁰).

Back to the NAO’s *Assessment of the Capability Review programme*:

“3.2 Departments are unable to demonstrate yet whether the actions they have taken in response to Capability Reviews are affecting outcomes. We asked change directors for evidence that actions taken in response to Capability Reviews were improving delivery outcomes. A half (eight) responded positively, but most cited new or improved processes, and we found no evidence of improved delivery clearly linked to Capability Review responses. Departments found it difficult to separate the impact of Capability Reviews from other programmes and from events that also stimulate change, such as the arrival of a new Permanent Secretary or Secretary of State, external media criticism or an increase in budget (p.34).” (*We resist with difficulty the temptation to italicise.*)

⁹ Defence Committee – Third Report, Session 2008-09, *Conclusions and recommendations*, paragraph 12

How much methodology and bench-marking and process is needed – and the *Assessment* has its own array – before someone realises that all the Capability Review will find is a mare’s nest?

We suggest – moving within metaphorical zoology – that we have here an elephant in the nation’s drawing room: elaborate programmes and processes that exist solely to justify themselves and perpetuate their own existence.

We cannot resist commenting on the fact that the *Assessment* has on its cover a picture of Burghley House. William Cecil would have little truck with our insistence that Government be accountable to Parliament. He kept the England of the first Elizabeth safe by methods that we would not of course condone. Still, we suggest – on strong evidence to which we have access – that he would have had no truck at all with the expense and complexity of the management techniques the *Assessment* assesses. His commonsense and dislike of unnecessary public expenditure seem an excellent example, even four centuries on.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Everything we have published is in the public domain. It would be wrong to publish what we know of the membership of some of the bodies we have discussed, or those who attend them – not necessarily the same thing at all – but there seems to be considerable duplication of membership. This suggests either that key players are spending too much time at meetings with overlapping remits, or that some of these meetings happen without key players. Meanwhile the strategic defence and security of the United Kingdom – not to mention the day-to-day tactical support of our troops in Afghanistan – has developed sclerosis.

We repeat, accountability demands clarity. The new Parliamentary Joint Committee – if it is ever actually set up – will not be able to monitor the development and delivery of the National Security Strategy if it cannot see clearly who is responsible for what.

Our concern is primarily for defence and security *strategy*: but of course there can be no hard and fast line between strategic policy and delivery. The Chiefs of Staff, the heads of the intelligence services, the heads of Whitehall departments – those who have to deliver – need to feed their experience directly into the development of strategy. Their time is precious and must not be wasted. We suggest that the proliferation of intermediary committees and secretariats, not to

mention the new management techniques, hinders this direct input, and lengthens lead times to no good purpose.

New burdens on government institutions are no necessary argument for reinventing the wheels of government. To the contrary: there is much that is old under the sun, as well as much that is new. For instance, open societies need secret operations, and the United Kingdom has long had robust arrangements in this area, that may well not require a new dispensation but rather the re-establishment of trust in the arrangements we have. The present economic crisis suggests that stringent economies are needed across government. More needs to be done with less. It is high time for the modish accretions of the boom years to be stripped back.

In less than a year a Prime Minister must take office after an election. That Prime Minister will have a new and a direct mandate. We trust that our institutional arrangements for defence and security will have been explicitly debated in the election campaign. The machinery of government is not an obvious vote winner – they analyse it rarely down at the Dog and Duck – but granted that it can still generate proposals such as that for identity cards, things may well be different in 2009/10.

The alphabet soup and committee spaghetti in our charts are – we believe – anything but healthy, and anything but conducive to the coherent and urgent work needed to provide for the defence and security of the United Kingdom.

We recommend that:

1. The Parliamentary Joint Committee should be set up without further delay.
2. A simplified Committee structure within the Cabinet Office should be established. There should be a single Cabinet committee concerned with defence and security, chaired by a senior member of the Cabinet for whom this forms his or her principal task in government, and it should be supported by a single powerful Cabinet Office secretariat.
3. Government should focus on its executive functions more directly, pruning its management processes ruthlessly, and leave to Parliament the task of scrutiny and assessment. That way defence and security institutions will be effectively accountable to Parliament, and through Parliament, to the electorate.

Work should also be begun at once, by bi-partisan agreement, on the Defence and Security Review that is urgently needed, granted the changed circumstances of

recent months and patent problems of recent years. As we said earlier, we believe that our proposed changes to the machinery of government should enable this to be an open process, assist in winning it general consent, and therefore help materially in its implementation.

These are blunt recommendations, and they may seem to come from the Stone Age – or the Garden of Eden? – but they may be none the worse for that. Of course these are immensely complex matters: all the more need to seek simplicity and clarity at the top, rather than to take refuge in a wasteland of committees, systems and process. A vast industry has grown up to service all this. We cannot see that it is an essential one.

We have some historical perspective. This is how nations die. Great powers can strangle themselves with process and become completely sclerotic: Austro-Hungary in 1913 could barely function at all. But at just the same time, and even in an era of great domestic political tension, this country produced the Committee of Imperial Defence to provide defence and security co-ordination across party boundaries. It was not perfect, and its history demonstrates some of the pitfalls; but it was not a bad precedent.¹¹

We may also represent something of an institutional memory. We know what has worked in the more recent past, as the present is not working. We hope further to digest what we have learned, to learn from any response we may provoke, and to continue to try to make a contribution to the development of robust and resilient institutions to meet these most important of needs. There still remains, after all, the challenge of identifying what should be done – but at least we will know how to do it.

The Government is substantially failing either to formulate or to implement a satisfactory defence and security strategy. We have been told that by almost all those we have talked to, whether they were serving or retired. At the very least neither the public nor our Parliamentary representatives have a clear idea of what that strategy is, in spite of myriad publications on the subject. If nothing else, the results of our enquiries as set out above perhaps go some way to explain why.

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_of_Imperial_Defence

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

DE&S	Defence Equipment & Support
CCC	Civil Contingencies Committee
CCS	Civil Contingencies Secretariat
CONTEST	Pursue Prevent Protect Prepare - The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism
DOP	Defence and Overseas Policy
ISS	Intelligence and Security Secretariat
FDPS	Foreign and Defence Policy Secretariat
MoD	Ministry of Defence
NAO	National Audit Office
NDPB	Non-Departmental Public Body
NSID	Ministerial Committee on National Security, International Relations and Development
NSS	National Security Secretariat
OSCT	Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism
PSA	Public Service Agreement
SR	Spending Round

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