

As the new government gets to grips with its programme, including a Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) questions remain about the ability of the Whitehall machinery to deliver a 'Strategic' programme. Major General Jonathan Shaw who saw 'the centre' at first hand recently spoke to Nick Watts Deputy Director General of the U K Defence Forum about what he sees as the shortcomings of Whitehall.

"The systemic failings of Whitehall are easily observed, but not so easy to remedy. Basically Whitehall is structured to deliver departmental answers to departmental problems." Anything bigger than this, such as an SDSR, requires Whitehall "to bend itself out of shape." Shaw believes that the campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan saw this tendency in operation. As Shaw observes: "the comprehensive approach was in effect a collection of individual departments working to their own plans with nobody effectively overseeing them." Shaw believes that if Whitehall is going to address the SDSR properly, things must change.

"The SDSR" says Shaw "must balance security concerns and defence concerns to face up to the challenge of ISIS – which will involve the education department to counter radicalisation taking place in schools and colleges, as well as the more traditional threats of hybrid warfare, as seen in Ukraine. These are cross-governmental matters, but the way Whitehall is set up is inadequate to respond to them." Shaw thinks that Whitehall is structurally flawed, that there is no unified executive methodology. "When COBRA meets the participants spend the first few days working out what language they are going to use."

When it comes to Strategy Shaw believes that there is no agreed taxonomy, no definition of what a strategy is. During the Blair years Shaw spent 'an awful lot of time' in COBRA during various civil disputes. "When you get the right people around the table the process works very well." Shaw believes that the Counter Terrorism policy is a very good example – "there is a common language, an understood methodology, a clear chain of command. A common inductive approach to planning – which enables us to beat the opposition to the punch." Across the rest of Government, during the Iraq and Afghan campaigns, it was never clear who was in charge. "DFID one of the main levers of influence are forced by legislation to be 'separate from government action' – how incoherent can that be? Particularly regarding the crop substitution programme (to defeat the narcotics traffic)."

Shaw believes that there was a disconnect between the levers and the political goals being pursued in Iraq and Afghanistan. He believes that both campaigns were over militarized. "No lessons have been learnt from the experience in Northern Ireland; it took from 1969 until 1973 – 74 to accept police primacy to try to achieve a political settlement; it took way longer in Iraq and Afghanistan to come to the same conclusion. I just fear that Whitehall is not a learning organisation. An ahistorical approach to the world is not doing the country any favours. This is not a function of budgets. Coherent plans make the budgets work better."

Considering whether the National Security Advisor should be a political figure in cabinet, as some have suggested, or a civil servant as at present, Shaw is very clear. "The National Security Advisor, [coming from the FCO] represents a department that is diminished in Whitehall. The former Chairman of the Defence Select Committee Rory Stewart said that 'the UK has lost its ability to understand the world.' Under the coalition the FCO became a branch of UKTI." Shaw believes that the FCO has "no executive methodology". "It is not a project managing department: they like writing letters to each other."

Concerning the relationship between Crown servants and their political masters, Shaw believes that there should be a more robust dialogue. "We have compromised ourselves by giving duff advice because it was seen as being convenient. There is a real difficulty speaking truth to power when the leadership isn't listening. The choice is to be right but irrelevant or being wrong and marginally relevant. The temptation in any large organisation is for individuals to 'stay with the programme.'"

Short term tactical aspirations need to be matched to Strategic goals. An example of this was the consideration of the consequences of the overthrow of Gaddafi. "How did this fit into the UK's wider counter terrorist Strategy? When General David Richards (as Chief of the Defence Staff) asked this question, he was seen as being obstructive by the prime minister, leading to Cameron's remark: 'you do the fighting I'll do the talking.'" In the same vein Shaw refers to the Iraq campaign. "By agreeing to take part, the UK was beholden to US strategy. The pressure on Blair was immense. From the UK's perspective it was a political failure – Blair wanted to leave, the US wanted to stay. The UK tried to slink away." In pursuing this approach, Shaw believes that the UK lost credibility with our US allies, as well as with other countries in the Gulf.

Returning to the theme of a common 'Whitehall' language, Shaw believes that military operations should produce a unity of effort across government. A big problem is for Whitehall to

understand when the military should step back and enable the redevelopment phase to begin. The Iraq campaign provides another example. "War assumes military primacy. If the aim is to remove the regime, then military primacy should have been put on the back burner. The military is there to assist the political process. Political outcomes are always fudged."

Shaw points to the Marshall plan in post-1945 Europe, which was not run by the military. A similar approach should have been adopted in Iraq. "Military action is as worthwhile as the political plan it is supporting." Shaw believes that the political class is overwhelmed by the challenges facing them. The military should not make themselves useful by stepping into a breach they are unsuited to and incapable of filling.

Looking to the future, Force 2020 established by the 2010 SDSR is premised on Contingent Operations. Shaw wonders what this will mean in practice. Once again Shaw believes that Whitehall is hiding behind linguistic obfuscation. "Warfare of the future, even state on state will not involve the clash of armoured divisions. Hybrid warfare is now an avowed policy of the Russians. In Ukraine we have seen a tiny amount of military used. It is not a question of mass, but of our ability to use force appropriately."