

Permanent Secretary and National Security Adviser Accused of Lying to Parliament

One year on from the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, it is worth reminding ourselves of the appalling performance of the UK's senior officials before and during the evacuation from Kabul and their apparent willingness to lie to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee rather than admit their mistakes.

Here are verbatim extracts **(with emphasis added)** from [the committee's report](#).

"[I have] never in my career seen anything within the civil service so badly managed"

[There was no] plan for evacuating Afghans who supported the UK mission, without being directly employed by the UK Government, despite knowing 18 months before the collapse of Afghanistan that an evacuation might be necessary. The hasty effort to select those eligible for evacuation was poorly devised, managed, and staffed; and the department failed to perform the most basic crisis-management functions.

The FCDO failed to prepare adequately to shut down the British Embassy, despite many warnings, including an internal report of 21 July that warned of "rapid Taliban advances" and said "the Embassy may need to close". The timeline for the Embassy's closure had to be cut twice—from five days to two, and then to just nine hours, due to the deteriorating situation. In the rush, staff failed to remove sensitive documents identifying Afghan job applicants, leaving them to fall into the Taliban's hands.

There was chaos within the Foreign Office as thousands of emails and phone calls flooded in from people seeking help. The existence of the three separate channels for evacuation—administered by three departments—added to the confusion. Many applicants submitted their cases to each one, and the information was further duplicated by MPs and others trying to help them.

There were at least six crisis email inboxes in use in the FCDO alone, and emails were repeatedly forwarded between them, facing long delays at each stage. One whistleblower told us that there was no standardised FCDO process for handling this correspondence, no system to track what had been done with any emails, and no process to identify duplicates, while the very existence of some inboxes was forgotten about entirely between shifts. There was poor cooperation with the MOD, which was responsible for the operational side of the evacuation. Many emails from desperate people simply went unanswered, or even unread.

One whistleblower, a senior FCDO official, told us that she had "never in my career seen anything within the civil service so badly managed." There was no induction for new staff on the team, no clear tasking, no system for recording decisions or actions, and no system for handovers between shifts. The team was severely understaffed, and the rostering system was ineffective. ...

A junior official with two years' work experience was the only person monitoring the Special Cases inbox on the afternoon of 21 August, as hundreds of emails poured in. This was the height of the evacuation effort, which would end days later, and the last chance for many Afghan judges, journalists and human rights defenders seeking help from the British Government.

The team working on Special Cases, designed at speed by the FCDO after the fall of Kabul, lacked clarity about the criteria they were using to prioritise cases, and the goals of the policy they were implementing. The whistleblowers describe an arbitrary and chaotic approach to prioritising requests for help, based on “who happened to open or forward which random email”. The criteria for selecting those to evacuate from many thousands of emails—vulnerability, support for UK objectives, and sensitivity of the case—were “so broad as to be largely meaningless”.

Compounding the problems of the scheme’s design, those implementing it generally had little knowledge of Afghanistan on which to base their decisions about who to prioritise. Attempts by outside stakeholders to offer expertise were often unsuccessful. One whistleblower rejected the Permanent Under-Secretary’s claim that the process had drawn on knowledge of Afghanistan from across Government as “fantasy”, stating that the criteria were “impossible to evaluate with the information we had in the timeframes that were necessary”.

The Department tried to mislead the Select Committee

The Foreign Office has not been open about [its] failings. In the course of the inquiry, it has given us answers that, in our judgement, are at best intentionally evasive, and often deliberately misleading. Those who lead the department should be ashamed that civil servants of great integrity felt compelled to risk their careers to bring to light the appalling mismanagement of the crisis, and the misleading statements to Parliament that followed.

The Nowzad case [see further below] is part of a wider problem with transparency and accountability in the FCDO. Officials and ministers have also avoided our questions on other issues raised in this *inquiry*, including the dates of the then-Foreign Secretary’s holiday in August, and the circumstances of the decision for the UK’s Ambassador to remain in Kabul when other Embassy staff left. On occasion, officials appeared frustrated about the time taken up by responding to this inquiry. Despite the manifest problems with its role in the withdrawal, the department has been reluctant to admit to any shortcomings.

The Permanent Secretary and the National Security Adviser appear to have Lied to the Committee

[Nowzad was an animal charity. Nowzad’s British founder left Kabul with his animals on 28 August as the only passenger on a 230-seat private aircraft, after his staff were unable to enter the airport.]

[On] 25 August— the day when the Government ceased to call people forward for evacuation, and after the Special Cases team had removed many vulnerable individuals from the lists due to lack of capacity— FCDO officials saw that the Defence Secretary had tweeted, in the early hours of the morning, that Nowzad staff had been cleared for evacuation. This ... was irresponsible and risked “policy making by Twitter”. Officials sought “rapid confirmation” from the National Security Adviser, Sir Stephen Lovegrove. He agreed to “urgently” seek “clear guidance from No. 10”, then phoned shortly afterwards to confirm that they should call the group forward. Many senior FCDO officials believed that the decision came directly from the Prime Minister.

We tried to trace the source of the decision to overrule the FCDO’s prioritisation process. The Prime Minister denied any role in the decision, as did the Defence Secretary. ... [When] we asked the National Security Adviser whom he had consulted, he said he did not remember. ... **The fact that nobody can state who made the decision that Nowzad staff should be evacuated suggests at best that the political leadership was chaotic and at worst that senior figures are not telling the truth.**

We asked the Foreign Office for an explanation of the Nowzad case on many occasions; **we repeatedly received answers that appeared calculated to mislead or to evade our questions and that were**

contradicted when new facts came into the public domain The Permanent Under-Secretary initially told us that Nowzad staff had been included in the original list of potential evacuees and simply called forward when space became available, and that the Defence Secretary made his public statement once this had taken place. **After this account was revealed to be false** by the evidence of the two whistleblowers, he eventually admitted that—far from the routine process he had described—the last-minute intervention from the Defence Secretary had triggered urgent discussions involving top FCDO officials, the Foreign Secretary and the National Security Adviser. No other Special Cases evacuation involved this type of consultation.

In December, we asked the Permanent Under-Secretary and the PM’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan six times whether there had been “a ministerial instruction or a political instruction to help these people [...] received by you or the Foreign Office”. **They evaded the question each time, and were unable to find emails on the subject that were subsequently published by the Committee. After revelations from whistleblowers, the FCDO was forced to concede that there had been an instruction from outside the department. It has been unable to account for the discrepancies, or the disappearance of the email evidence.**

Note

It may be relevant that National Security Adviser, Stephen Lovegrove, was directly appointed as a Permanent Secretary in 2013. He had never previously been a civil servant, and had therefore never previously been exposed to [civil service ethics and the Civil Service Code](#).

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