

Former British cabinet minister charged with perjury

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Jonathan Aitken's name dominated the headlines in 1995, as the Conservative government of John Major reeled under yet another crisis involving the financial impropriety of one of its MPs.

Aitken, former Chief Secretary to the Treasury and Minister for Defence Procurement, resigned from the government shortly after the *Guardian* newspaper accused him of breaking parliamentary rules by not declaring his September 1993 stay at the Ritz Hotel Paris had been paid for by somebody else. Aitken denounced the allegations as "wicked lies" and announced that he was going to sue the *Guardian* and *Granada TV/World in Action*, who had repeated the allegations, for libel. He maintained that his wife had paid the bill on his behalf.

Aitken subsequently lost the libel action and, on May 21 of this year, was charged with perjury, perverting the course of justice and conspiracy to pervert the cause of justice. He is the first Cabinet minister, serving or former, to be charged with this offence in modern times.

The spate of allegations and exposures of "sleaze" and corruption by the *Guardian* and other papers like Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times* was part of a campaign to undermine and destabilise the Tory government and prepare the way for the election of a New Labour government. A number of MPs were made the subject of sex scandals.

At the same time as the Aitken crisis emerged, it was revealed that two Tory MPs had been paid money by Mohammed Al Fayed, the billionaire owner of the upscale Ritz Hotel and Harrods department store, to ask questions on his behalf in Parliament. Al Fayed collaborated with the *Guardian* on this exposé and also in proving that Aitken's hotel bill had been paid for by representatives of the Saudi royal family.

On the day charges of perjury were brought against him, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that Aitken was to inform police that he had lied about who paid the Ritz hotel bill to prevent disclosure that he had been working as a secret agent for the British government.

The report alleges that figures in the highest echelons of the state were involved in the Aitken affair. The *Daily Telegraph* article is based on the written evidence of Said Ayas, who has also been arrested and charged with perjury by police in Britain. Ayas is an ex-employee and aide of Prince Mohammed, the son of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. Ayas's statement details the role that he and Aitken played in transmitting British intelligence reports to the Saudi regime.

According to Ayas, Aitken's first meeting with King Fahd took place following the announcement by Saudi Defence Minister Prince Sultan, in January 1993, that an extension of the Al Yamaha arms deal was to be cancelled. The Al Yamaha agreement secured by the Thatcher administration was worth some £5 billion to the British defence industry.

Aitken met the King, using Ayas as an intermediary, and was able to secure a commitment that the cancellation of the Al Yamaha contract would be overruled. Ayas claims that at this meeting Aitken discussed Iran's recent acquisition of new submarines and said this represented a considerable military threat to Saudi Arabia.

Aitken and Ayas then arranged for a meeting to take place the following week between then Prime Minister John Major and King Fahd. According to Aitken, John Major met King Fahd in Riyadh on January 20, 1993 and secured an agreement that the defence contract would be restored and extended. The deal would include Saudi Arabia purchasing 48 Tornado warplanes, 24 Hawk jets and a training programme.

Major promised that Britain would provide information to Saudi Arabia that the secret services had obtained from an agent in Iran.

In his evidence to the police Ayas comments, “I was thanked and congratulated for my part in bringing the project back to life by several British officials (including Sir Alan Thomas and Jonathan Aitken) and by King Fahd. King Fahd said John Major had promised to share special information with him on Iran. As a result of this instruction from the King, I saw Jonathan Aitken and some of his officials, including Sir Alan Thomas, three or four times in the next six months to discuss Iranian naval threats to Saudi Arabia and British assistance in containing those threats.”

According to Ayas, Aitken was due to meet Prince Mohammed at the Ritz Hotel in Paris on September 18, 1993 to discuss further issues relating to the Iranian submarines. However the meeting did not take place, as the Prince was concerned that the Ritz was not a secure location. Aitken and the Prince held a meeting the next day in Geneva instead.

Ayas claims that he was instructed by Prince Mohammed to pay Aitken’s Ritz Hotel bill. “He also instructed me to keep Mr Aitken’s visit secret and all matters relating to it, including the payment of the hotel bill. I know that Prince Mohammed considered that this was a matter of discussions of defence, security and intelligence secrets between two government ministers.”

Ayas testifies that on December 15, 1993 Aitken personally delivered a top-secret report by British Intelligence to King Fahd in Jeddah. The King was so impressed with its contents that he offered to give Aitken a box of jewellery, which he refused.

Aitken enjoyed numerous business connections with Middle Eastern regimes before becoming a government Minister in 1992. Prince Mohammed and Wafic Said, a friend of the Saudi monarchy, gave backing to a financial services company that Aitken set up with his cousin in the 1980s. Before becoming Minister for Defence Procurement in 1992, he was a director of Al-Bilad, Fadace and Future Management Services, all Saudi-owned firms. Future Management Services supplied security equipment and weapons made in Britain to the Lebanese government. Until 1990 Aitken was a director of BMARC. In 1992 it was revealed that BMARC had sold weapons to Iraq, Iran and South

Africa in defiance of a government embargo.

The Aitken affair has exposed a secretive network of connections through which British firms have supplied weaponry and military expertise to some of the most oppressive regimes in the world. That this involves an elected Member of Parliament and a government Minister is testimony to the reciprocal interests tying politicians, government ministries and Parliament to big business.

When the scandal erupted over the Ritz Hotel affair, Mohammed Al Fayed said a business lobbyist told him, “you need to rent an MP just like you rent a London taxi.” In the last five years, numerous exposures of political corruption in Britain confirm this statement.

The incoming Labour government promised to clamp down on “government sleaze” and the unbridled lobbying of business interests that took place under the Conservatives. Within months of coming to power, however, the Labour Party was forced to acknowledge that it had accepted a £1 million donation from Formula One car racing magnate Bernie Ecclestone. Formula One was subsequently exempted from a ban on tobacco advertising.



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