Britain: Blair defeats motion for inquiry into Iraqi WMDs

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The June 4 parliamentary debate on whether the government had deliberately misled parliament and the British people over Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction witnessed an exercise in political cowardice by the ostensible critics of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

For days the media had been filled with security leaks confirming what the majority of people already knew, or had suspected—that the government had deliberately lied about Iraq's military capabilities in order to justify its participation in an illegal war of aggression against a poor and largely defenceless nation.

The Labour Party demonstrated its imperviousness to the seriousness of such charges, however, closing ranks behind the prime minister to defeat a Liberal Democrat motion calling for an independent judicial inquiry into the allegations and defeating it by 301 votes to 203.

In the end Blair had had a "good day", the media proclaimed, with only 11 Labour MPs supporting the opposition motion. None of them thought to question what Blair's victory actually said about the state of official British politics.

Last September, the British government had released a dossier purportedly containing up-to-date intelligence information on Iraq's WMDs, which claimed Saddam Hussein would be able to launch a chemical and biological strike against the world within 45 minutes.

Yet, after nearly two months in which British and US troops have occupied huge swathes of Iraq, detaining and interrogating leading Ba'athist officials and scientists, no trace has been found of any chemical and biological weapons arsenal.

According to the *Daily Mirror*, coalition troops have searched 87 sites considered "prime" areas for the manufacture of such weapons by the US and Britain and found nothing. Nineteen of these had been identified by the US as "highest-priority" zones, but "instead of chemical or biological weapons, searchers uncovered a training facility for Iraq's Olympic swimming and diving teams, a drinks distillery and a factory making car licence plates," the paper reported. "A feared weapons store was, in fact, a US field artillery headquarters."

In his final report to the United Nations, delivered Monday June 2, chief weapons inspector Hans Blix verified that a three-month search of Iraq—cut short by the US-led war—had uncovered no evidence of WMDs.

Faced with such facts US officials had begun to dismiss the significance of Iraq's military capabilities as a factor in the decision to go to war. US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said it was possible Saddam Hussein had destroyed any illegal weaponry prior to the war—a statement flatly contradicting Blair's insistence as late as March 18 that claims Iraq had already destroyed its weapons were "palpably absurd".

Interviewed in *Vanity Fair*, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said the issue of WMDs had been cited for "bureaucratic reasons", an implicit acknowledgement that the issue had been raised solely to provide a smokescreen for US aggression aimed at establishing its hegemony in the Middle East and seizing control of vital oil resources.

Just as damaging to Blair's case, anonymous senior figures within Britain's intelligence services began briefing against government. At least four different sources were cited by the BBC as complaining that the government had distorted intelligence material in effort to press its case for war. The "45 minute" claim in particular had been inserted on the government's insistence, one had said, despite unease amongst chief spies that the charge had come from just one uncorroborated source.

Later, the *Guardian* newspaper ran transcripts of a conversation it said had taken place between Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and US Secretary of State Colin Powell in New York, just prior to the US Security Council meeting on February 5. Correspondent Dan Plesch, from the Royal United Services Institute think tank, claimed that according to the security source who had given him the transcript both had expressed serious doubts about the quality of intelligence on Iraq's banned weapons programme—with Powell allegedly telling Straw that he hoped the facts, when they emerged, would not "explode in their faces".

The reports immediately reignited divisions over the war, which had seen the government and much of the official opposition parties arraigned against the majority of British people.

Calls for judicial inquiry

Former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who had resigned over the war, led calls for an inquiry. The lack of any evidence supporting the government's claims over Iraq's chemical arsenal proved that Blair had committed a "monumental blunder" in moving so quickly to military action, he said.

Pointing out that the attorney general's legal advice to the government on justification for the war had been based on the existence of WMDs in Iraq, Cook noted, "If he [Saddam Hussein] did not have those weapons, then that legal base disappears."

Former International Development Secretary Clare Short went even further. Short had supported the government on the war, but resigned shortly afterwards complaining that the prime minister had misled her as to future plans for Iraq, specifically over the role of the United Nations.

In an interview with the *Telegraph* she said, "I have concluded that the PM had decided to go to war in August sometime and he duped us all along. He had decided for reasons that he alone knows to go to war over Iraq and to create this sense of urgency and drive it: the way the intelligence was spun was part of that drive."

Short suggested that Blair's efforts to win UN backing for military action were a charade. The prime minister had entered a secret pact with President George W. Bush in September 2002 to go to war in the spring, she said, and everything that the government had done was in order to justify that predetermined course.

In addition, the prime minister had deliberately targeted the French

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government's objections to war without a UN mandate in order to build up a war frenzy, she said.

Presenting a parliamentary motion for an independent inquiry into the allegations. Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy said, "I suspect that in presentational terms, Number 10 has gone for the greatest, most arresting presentation of the facts, but that in itself may have had the very unfortunate effect of misleading certain people."

Blair's response

In response, the government attempted to dismiss the charges as simply the rantings of the usual antiwar dissenters, motivated by pique over the government's triumph in Iraq.

Blair insisted that responsibility for the dossiers of evidence presented by the government on Iraq's capabilities rested with the Joint Intelligence Committee, which includes the heads of MI5, MI6, GCHQ and other senior intelligence figures. The security leaks suggesting the government had doctored intelligence material or expressed private misgivings as to its veracity were the work of "rogue elements" within the security services out to get the Labour government, Labour's John Reid told the *Times* newspaper. Reid's remarks were backed up by chief whip, Hilary Armstrong, who claimed skullduggery was afoot in the intelligence world.

Reid's intervention threatened to backfire in the government's face. It is one thing to accuse the prime minister of being a deceitful toady of Bush, hell-bent on dragging the country into an illegal adventure, and quite another to impugn the motives of Britain's spies—spooks, snoops and assassins they may be, rogues never.

Pressed on whether—if the government truly believed itself to be the target of a faction of the state—it should not immediately convene an inquiry, Reid backtracked.

There is no doubt that elements within Britain's security services were extremely dissatisfied with the government's presentation of intelligence reports, especially since virtually all of them have proven worthless and have made the British intelligence service into something of a laughing stock. And some at least considered Blair's support for a US-led war reckless and contrary to Britain's own interests in the Middle East.

Divisions exposed

The row points to fundamental disaffection within broader sections of the British establishment. During Wednesday's parliamentary debate Blair had gloated at his critics, "They said there would be thousands dead. They said it was my Vietnam. They said that the Middle East would be in flames."

Blair implied that all of this had proved to be nonsense, but the death toll already runs into thousands. According to the Stop the War coalition, the number of reported civilian deaths caused by the US/UK intervention currently stands at a minimum of 5,434 and it continues to mount—from unexploded ordinance bombs, the lack of basic amenities and poor sanitation—and most significantly from direct confrontations between the Iraqi people and coalition forces.

Reports indicate growing social unrest, including riots, against US/UK forces that are seen as a force of colonial occupation. Every day brings fresh reports of British troops being returned to barracks or investigated on charges of abusing Iraqis and US forces firing on and killing civilians and being targeted in return.

Sections of the Labour Party fear that Iraq may yet prove to be Blair's Vietnam. Short referred to concerns at the growing instability in Iraq, warning, "Baghdad is a disaster. Everything is wrecked. It is completely violent.... The whole humanitarian system can't work because it's all so dangerous and disorderly."

As to the Middle East, a study released June 3 by the Pew Global Attitudes project found that the war in Iraq has caused anti-American sentiment to reach an all-time high worldwide, especially in Muslim countries.

Even Sir Max Hastings, former editor of the conservative *Daily Telegraph* and a supporter of the war, was moved to complain, "The Prime Minister sent British troops and sacrificed British lives on the basis of a deceit ... and it stinks."

Hastings noted with concern the US administration's "new round of sabre-rattling against Iran"—with whom Britain has sought to cultivate friendly relations—especially given that it had been unable to secure any kind of stability in Afghanistan and now Iraq.

News commentators had noted that should the prime minister prove to have misled the country, he would have to resign. In parliament, former Labour chancellor Dennis Healey reiterated that such a charge, if proven, was a resigning issue.

In the end Blair was able to win the day in Parliament by making clear that he was not the only one that stood to lose out. In a parliamentary vote March 18, the government had comfortably won its resolution to support British participation in the war by 412 to 149 votes, with just 52 abstentions.

That vote was taken despite the fact that it was already clear that the entire case against Iraq was built on a tissue of lies, buttressed by Orwellian doublespeak, in which occupation became liberation and war peace.

The issue of weapons of mass destruction was the casus belli through which the government sought to defy popular opposition to the war and jettison international law. Advised that the US policy of "regime change" was illegal, and could open the government up to charges of war crimes, Blair had to maintain that Iraq's military capability presented such a pressing and immediate threat that a preemptive strike was necessary for world security.

To this end, the truth was bent and even manufactured to suit the government's political end of joining with the US war drive in an attempt to carve out a new sphere of interest for British imperialism in the Middle East.

Pulling the threads of the lie over WMDs, then, would cause the entire ball to unravel—unmasking not only the prime minister and his US allies but also the utter perfidy of much of the Labour Party.

And if the prime minister could be held to account for his deceit over Iraq, what about all the other lies and deceptions practiced by the government on a daily basis?

And so parliament upheld its right to continue lying and deceiving the British people, agreeing only that the charges over WMDs should be investigated by two committees—the Joint Intelligence Committee and a cross-party Intelligence and Security Committee—both of which will meet in private and can be relied upon to produce a whitewash.

The issue is by no means sidelined, however. New revelations continue to emerge daily. And though the party hierarchy can intimidate Labour MPs, few outside parliament will feel restrained from calling the prime minister and his coterie the liars that they are, and demanding they be held to account.

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