

Crisis over missing Iraqi WMDs

Britain: Blair, advisor boycott parliamentary inquiry

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Prime Minister Tony Blair and his director of communications Alastair Campbell have made clear they will refuse to give evidence to a House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee investigation into whether they deliberately lied or distorted intelligence regarding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Blair has countered demands for an independent judicial inquiry into the publication of two now-discredited intelligence briefings before the Iraq war by claiming that an inquiry by the Parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee would be sufficient to the task.

This body is appointed by the prime minister and examines the expenditure, administration and policy of MI5, MI6 and the spy centre GCHQ. Its cross-party membership of nine from both Houses is chaired by Labour's chief whip, Ann Taylor MP. It meets in private and reports to the prime minister, not to parliament, and Blair hopes it can be relied on to produce a whitewash.

But Blair and Campbell have been forced to tip their hand more openly by the decision on June 4—the day of the parliamentary debate on the Liberal Democrat motion calling for a judicial inquiry—of the Foreign Affairs Committee to mount its own investigation into whether the Foreign Office “presented accurate and complete information to parliament in the period leading up to military action in Iraq, particularly in relation to Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.”

The Foreign Affairs Committee is dominated by the Labour Party and an inquiry under its auspices would, on its face, seem far less dangerous to Blair than the judicial inquiry that the Liberal Democrats, Tories and

a handful of labour dissidents have demanded. But it does hold most of its hearings in public and reports directly to parliament. Its chair, Donald Anderson MP (Labour), said the inquiry would be more credible than one by the Intelligence and Security Committee because the ISC “are appointed by the prime minister and reporting to the prime minister... There would be a credibility problem with them which there would not be with our inquiry.”

This was too much “transparency” and “accountability” for Blair to contemplate. To be placed in a situation where he would have to lie before a parliamentary body would place him in serious political danger. So through his staff he let it be known that he was soon to give evidence to the Commons liaison committee, made up of the chairs of all the select committees, as he does twice a year—and this was the appropriate venue for him to address questions on Iraq.

Campbell could not even offer this lame excuse. The Foreign Affairs Committee wanted to take his testimony because his department was instrumental in drawing up the second government dossier on Iraqi WMDs published in February that was largely plagiarised from publicly available documents, including a 12-year-old thesis by an American student.

The dossier was published under the name of the joint intelligence committee, but in reality was drafted without its approval in order to reinforce the case for war being presented to the United Nations Security Council by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

On June 10, the Intelligence and Security Committee issued its annual report. Embarrassing Blair still further, it was explicitly critical of how the second “dodgy dossier” was published without MI6 approval.

Its criticisms are based on evidence it took from the head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove.

The annual report states that the committee supported the “responsible use of intelligence... to inform the public,” but added, “It is imperative that the agencies are consulted before any of their material is published.”

The ISC has said it will also examine whether claims made in the earlier September 2002 dossier were exaggerated. This first dossier alleged that Iraq had a continuing programme of chemical and biological weapons and had tried to acquire nuclear material from Africa. The latter claim was backed up with documents that the UN subsequently declared to be childish and obvious forgeries.

Ann Taylor refused to confirm or deny whether Blair or Campbell would be questioned during the ISC’s Iraq inquiry.

The refusal by the prime minister and his top spin doctor to testify before the Foreign Affairs Committee has opened them up to renewed political attack. Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith wrote to Blair saying, “It would be quite incredible if any inquiry into Downing Street’s use of intelligence material did not take evidence from Mr. Campbell... To ensure that the committee can come to the considered judgement which you promised last week, can you reassure me that Alastair Campbell will be instructed if asked to attend?”

But Blair and Campbell must calculate that taking the heat on this question is less damaging than actually testifying.

Blair doesn’t simply face the somewhat pathetic opposition seen during the June 4 parliamentary debate—which saw all but 11 Labour MPs line up behind him. The exposure of the lies used to justify the war is being played out before millions of workers who opposed the war for oil waged by the US and Britain.

And if the government is found to have deliberately lied about Iraqi WMD programmes, then the war must be deemed to be an illegal war of aggression and Blair, President George W. Bush and their cohorts must be charged as war criminals.

A case against Blair charging him as a war criminal has already been placed before the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague by the Athens Bar Association. And now Rabinder Singh QC, a leading international and human rights barrister at Matrix

chambers, has called for a judicial review to be set up on the ground that no weapons of mass destruction have been found.

Blair’s wife, Cherie, is one of the partners in the Matrix chambers.

A June 8 article in the *Observer* based on Singh’s legal opinion—prepared for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and other peace groups—argues that the original view of the Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, that the war was legal is no longer valid because it was based on the need to disarm nonexistent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

The summary of his legal opinion states, “The allegations made by former members of the Cabinet in the recent past, that the evidence of the existence of weapons of mass destruction was exaggerated by the UK and the US prior to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, call into question the factual foundation for the Attorney General’s view that the invasion was lawful in international law. In our view there is therefore a strong case for establishing a judicial inquiry to examine that legal question.”

Singh concludes, “Without any disrespect to the two parliamentary inquiries which are to take place, we consider that there is a strong case for establishing a judicial inquiry to examine what are essentially legal questions... It is quintessentially the task of independent judges to decide questions of law and to assess evidence.”

CND and other groups are to use Singh’s legal opinion to push for a judicial review in the High Court. The *Observer* comments, “If an action was successful, it could lead to the Prime Minister being prosecuted for war crimes in an action led by his wife’s chambers.”



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