

Australia: Opposition parties head off genuine probe into the government's WMD lies

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Last week, the Australian Senate voted to establish an inquiry into the intelligence used by the Howard government to justify its decision to join the US-led war on Iraq. While the minor parties—the Greens and Australian Democrats—had originally moved a resolution for a full Senate inquiry, they rapidly capitulated to the Labor Party's proposal for the investigation to be shunted into a parliamentary committee that oversees Australia's security agencies.

This means that the inquiry will be conducted in secret. There is every possibility its findings will never be made public or even reported to parliament. Moreover, the committee lacks the power to investigate the Office of National Assessments (ONA) and the Defence Intelligence Organisation, two key agencies that report on intelligence directly to the prime minister's office. Whether the ONA gives evidence to the committee is entirely at the discretion of Prime Minister John Howard.

The inquiry will examine whether the government was given “flawed” intelligence, not whether the Howard government—along with its US and British allies—manufactured evidence and deliberately lied in order to justify a war that was deeply opposed by millions of ordinary people in Australia, the US, Britain and internationally.

Like Bush and Blair, Howard insisted time and again that the war on Iraq was essential to strip Saddam Hussein's regime of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that posed a “clear and immediate danger” to the US, its friends and to Iraq's neighbours.

On February 4, 2003, Howard told the Australian parliament: “My purpose today is to explain why Iraq's defiance of the UN and its possession of chemical and biological weapons and its pursuit of a nuclear capability poses a threat to the stability and security of our world... Iraq continues to work on developing nuclear weapons—uranium has been sought from Africa that has no civil nuclear application in Iraq.”

Even after the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency Dr Mohamed ElBaradei informed the UN Security Council on March 7 that the documents on Iraq's importation of uranium “are in fact not authentic” and confirmed that UN inspectors had found “no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq”, Howard continued to hammer away on the WMD theme.

On March 12, he declared in a national television address: “The government [is] determined to join other countries to deprive Iraq of its chemical and biological weapons capable of causing death and destruction on a mammoth scale.”

On the day of the first US bombing raids in Baghdad, and three days after a key-note speech by Bush claiming that intelligence gathered “leaves no doubt that the Iraqi regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised”, Howard insisted that the existence of WMDs remained the principal reason for committing to war.

On March 20 he told parliament: “We have made a very strong commitment to disarming Iraq...We do continue to worry about the ultimate and fateful coming together of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism.”

In the aftermath of the war, Howard's claims, like those of his counterparts in Washington and London, have been exposed as false. For nearly three months, coalition forces have had unrestricted control in Iraq. Top Iraqi scientists and former Baath regime leaders have been taken into custody and interrogated. Yet the US has failed to produce a shred of evidence of the existence of any WMDs.

Regardless, Howard has continued to defend the Australian government's participation in the criminal assault. Following the announcement of the parliamentary inquiry, he told Adelaide radio 5DN: “The judgment made by our intelligence services was that there was a weapons of mass destruction capacity, that Iraq had possessed weapons of mass destruction”. He denied that the government had asked intelligence agencies to “massage or overstate material”.

He went on: “I believe that people should be more patient about the discovery of further evidence,” and, “I think we should allow the process of examination to go on for a period of time before we start jumping to conclusions”. The duplicity of Howard's insistence on “patience” will not go unnoticed by millions of people who, in the months leading up to the war, witnessed Bush, Blair and Howard contemptuously dismiss repeated calls to allow the UN weapons inspectors adequate time to complete their work.

Like his counterparts in Britain and the US, Howard deliberately chose to ignore the comprehensive reports of the UN inspection teams, which were increasingly pointing to the

non-existence of the large stockpiles of biological and chemical weapons and evidence of a nuclear program claimed by the US.

Chief weapons inspector Hans Blix, speaking to the media after addressing the Council of Foreign Relations in New York this week, remarked that the Australian government had based its decision to go to war on “intelligence that their brethren brought up in the UK and the US” rather than on that provided by his inspection teams. Some of that intelligence, Blix said “did not turn out to be impressive.” Despite the fact that the inspection teams included many Australian staff, whom Blix described as “competent” and “excellent”, the Howard government had chosen to ignore their reports.

Giving evidence before the House of Commons foreign affairs select committee in London on June 19 former senior Australian defence analyst with the Office of National Assessment (ONA) Andrew Wilkie alleged that both the British and Australian governments had ignored the warnings of their own intelligence agencies that the US was intent on regime change in Iraq for “strategic and domestic reasons”.

Wilkie resigned from his job at ONA on March 11 in protest over the Howard government’s plan to join the war on Iraq. He was the only intelligence officer to make his concerns public before the invasion took place.

He told the London inquiry that Blair and Howard had “deliberately doctored and distorted evidence” about Iraq’s weapons program to back up a series of “ridiculous”, “preposterous” and “fundamentally flawed” claims. Both governments, he said, had been “deliberately intent on using WMD to exaggerate the Iraq threat so as to stay in step with the US...”

Speaking on the 50-page dossier released by the Blair government last September to justify the war on Iraq, Wilkie asked: “Is this a good document? No it’s a lousy document, because this document led us to expect that troops would go into Iraq and find weapons of mass destruction and they didn’t.” The claims in the Blair dossier were used extensively by Howard to back his argument for war.

Despite the mountain of evidence that that Howard and his ministers doctored and distorted intelligence, the Labor opposition has refused to indict them for deliberately lying to parliament and the Australian people, much less for participating in a criminal and illegal war that has cost the lives of thousands of innocent people.

Now the Labor Party is moving to bury the issue. Labor leader Simon Crean is just as anxious as Howard to avoid any public investigation into the WMD lies, because both prior to and during the war, he and the Labor Party gave them unqualified support.

Labor’s cowardice has allowed Howard to go on the offensive. “Our legal justification [for going to war] was that Iraq had failed to comply with the Security Council resolution 1441. You agreed that Iraq was in material breach, therefore you supported our legal justification,” he thundered in

parliament last week. Howard went on to attack anyone who sought to “denigrate what this government and country did” as supporting “the restoration of Saddam Hussein”.

Both the form of inquiry and its terms, will act as a cover for the government’s crimes, as well as strengthening its hand to carry out similar outrages within the Asia-Pacific region.

The Australian Democrats and the Greens are also deeply implicated. Having acknowledged the inquiry will be “controlled by the government” and will thus “let the government off the hook”, both parties eventually backed Labor’s proposal.

An open and public probing would not only cast light on the grubby, behind-the-scenes machinations involving all the official parties, but would reveal the great chasm that exists between the entire parliamentary setup and the great mass of the Australian people.

Howard’s capacity to brazen out the WMD crisis is a reflection, not of the government’s strength or popularity, as the media would have it, but of the total absence of any challenge or alternative within the official political framework. It constitutes a microcosm of the political relations that exist more generally.

The Howard government has only been able to implement its deeply reactionary agenda—an unprecedented assault on jobs, wages and social conditions, the rights of asylum seekers and immigrants, and on democratic and civil rights—because on every major policy it has received bi-partisan support from Labor. But this state of affairs has definite limits. At the very first signs of an independent movement of working people, fighting for their own class interests, the carefully cultivated façade of strength will crumble.



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