

Parliamentary whitewash of Blair's lies on Iraq falls flat

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9 July 2003

The Foreign Affairs Committee has turned verbal cartwheels in its efforts to absolve Prime Minister Tony Blair from the direct charge of having lied about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction and dragging Britain into an illegal US-led war. But while it has provided Blair, his spin-doctor Alastair Campbell and other top personnel with room to wriggle, it has singly failed to let them off the hook.

The FAC's verdict issued July 7 would not have been so accommodating to the government if Labour MPs did not dominate it—and if the opposition members from the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats had not been so politically spineless. But much of what it says is still embarrassing for Blair.

Its report, "The Decision to Go to War in Iraq", does its utmost to put the best gloss on the government's actions and intentions. It hails the fact that "unlike previous conflicts, the war in Iraq took place only after a substantive vote in parliament, a development which we welcome" and claims that the decision to go to war was "based on intelligence information—another welcome innovation by the government..."

It says nothing of the fact that parliament's vote ran contrary to the express wishes of the majority of the British population, most of whom believed the intelligence emanating from the government to be crude propaganda belied by any serious examination of the impact of 12 years of sanctions on Iraq and the almost constant surveillance it had faced from United Nations weapons inspectors.

The committee then has the nerve to excuse the government of deliberate deception on the grounds that they are supposed to have acted in line with intelligence that was the best available. It then acknowledges that this intelligence was not very good at all—raising the obvious question as to why the government was so keen to use poor intelligence in the first place.

The report states that it seemed Britain's intelligence agencies relied too much on Iraqi "defectors and on exiles with an agenda of their own".

Posing the question whether the government had exaggerated the threat from Iraqi weapons of mass destruction the report finds, "it appears likely that there was only limited access to reliable human intelligence in Iraq and that as a consequence the United Kingdom may have been heavily reliant on US technical intelligence, on defectors and on exiles with an agenda of their own."

It then adds, "We conclude that it is too soon to tell whether the government's assertion on Iraq's chemical and biological weapons will be borne out. However, we have no doubt that the threat posed to the United Kingdom forces was genuinely perceived as a real and present danger."

It gives a seal of approval to the government's first intelligence dossier produced in September 2002 because it was "in all probability well-founded on the basis of intelligence then available." But it then admits that one of its most serious claims—that Iraq was seeking uranium from Niger—turned out to be crude forgeries. The Foreign Office has not yet revealed the date when it learned from the US administration that some of

the documents relating to the claim had been forged.

"We conclude that it is very odd indeed that the government asserts that it was not relying on the evidence, which has since been shown to have been forged, but that eight months later it is still reviewing the other evidence."

As expected, it exonerates Campbell from having "sexed up" the September dossier by including the claim that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes. But it goes on to make broader points on Campbell's role that render this verdict faintly ridiculous.

Blair's top spin-doctor has launched a campaign against the BBC and its journalist Andrew Gilligan for having reported the allegation made by an unnamed senior MI6 figure against Campbell of including the 45-minute claim. Yet the committee is forced to note that the 45-minute claim came from "a single source and that there was no corroborating evidence," was "highlighted by the prime minister when he presented the dossier to the house" and that "a meeting to discuss the document which ministers had asked the chairman of the joint intelligence committee, John Scarlett, to prepare was chaired by Mr Campbell" who is not even an elected MP.

"The degree of autonomy given to the Iraq communications group chaired by Mr Campbell and the Coalition Information Centre which reported to him, as well as the lack of procedural accountability, were contributory factors to the affair of the 'dodgy dossier'", the report states. The dossier, produced in February this year, was largely plagiarised from an article by American research student Ibrahim al-Marashi with its language changed in order to claim that Iraq had links with terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda.

The report concludes, "It is wholly unacceptable for the government to plagiarise work without attribution and to amend it without either highlighting the amendments or gaining the assent of the original author."

The Iraq Communications Group's failure to attribute sources was held to be responsible for Blair "misrepresenting" it as intelligence evidence to parliament.

For this reason, the "central charge" that "ministers misled parliament" was found to be false.

The committee was forced to add a number of riders to this verdict, however. Most importantly the report concludes that the "jury is still out on the accuracy of the September dossier until substantial evidence of Iraq's WMD, or of their destruction, is found."

It calls the February dossier for which Campbell was directly responsible "wholly counter-productive" and says it was presented to parliament in a "fundamentally wrong" way in which Blair had "inadvertently made a bad situation worse".

It poses four questions to the government it wants answered within the next two months: Is the September dossier's verdict on Iraq's chemical and biological weapons threat still valid? What is the current assessment of the September dossier's warnings on Samoud 2 missiles and its claim that Iraq had 20 unaccounted for Hussein missiles? When was Foreign

Secretary Jack Straw told that the documents claiming Iraq had sought uranium from Niger were forged? And is the 45-minute claim still considered accurate in the light of the fact that Iraq did not use WMD?

There is an almost schizophrenic character to the report, which in one paragraph exonerates Blair, Campbell, Straw and Defence secretary Geoff Hoon only to then hurl awkward questions that leave the government open to further attacks.

The main reason for this is that the 11-strong committee had to make concessions to its Tory and Liberal members. Three Conservatives and one Liberal Democrat had forced a series of votes insisting that the report's language be toughened up. And they were occasionally lent support by the committee's Labour chairman, Donald Anderson, and more often by Labour maverick backbencher Andrew Mackinlay. In the end the committee only cleared Campbell of inserting the 45-minute claim on Anderson's casting vote, which defeated a Tory amendment 6-5 that said the issue was "non proven" as MPs had not been given enough documentation to make a proper judgement.

These concession in the main report helped prevent an even more damaging scenario whereby the non-Labour members could have issued a dissenting minority report and divided the committee openly on party lines. Even so, Tory FAC member Richard Ottaway stated publicly, "I have reached the conclusion the government did exaggerate the case for war in the run-up to the critical vote in Parliament," and both Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith and Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy have called for an independent inquiry.

The role of the Tory and Liberal Democrats in agreeing to the compromise offered by Anderson and company testifies to their own political culpability in the drive to war against Iraq. They calculated that they could not push the issue to an open split for three main reasons:

Firstly, their own parties would be found as guilty as the government of having supported the war on the pretext of a lie—and no one would have seriously believed they were fooled into doing so by the flimsy intelligence dossiers presented by Blair and company.

Secondly, pushing ahead with this attack puts them on a collision course with the Bush administration in Washington, which they all consider to be Britain's key ally and a dangerous enemy to make.

Thirdly, calling into question the reasons for the war would fuel opposition to the government in the population. This would not only endanger Britain's continuing occupation of Iraq and its chance to seize a share of the country's oil wealth. It would shift the political situation domestically by providing a focus for growing anger and disillusionment with the constant attacks on living standards and social provisions.

The Tories and the Liberal Democrats would much rather see political damage inflicted within the rarified environs of parliament, which they hope to be able to control and use for their own ends. But whatever calculations animated their caution, the government's political standing has never been lower and it remains dangerously exposed.

Blair's problems have only multiplied in recent days.

The government's ongoing efforts to shift the focus onto the BBC continue to backfire. The day before the report was issued the prime minister gave an interview to the *Observer* in which he again attacked the BBC and demanded an apology for them supposedly making "as serious an attack on my integrity there could possibly be".

The BBC has again refused to back down, arguing that the FAC's findings vindicate their decision to report discontent within the security services. Countering Blair they gave the *Observer* access to minutes of a meeting between their executives and the head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, in which he suggested that Syria and Iran posed a greater threat to world security than Iraq. They say this helped convince them to run the critical comments of their informer about Campbell.

The FAC has ensured that the issue could become even more explosive by expressing their belief that journalist Andrew Gilligan's contacts

within MI6 should be investigated. If this demand is taken up the government would be set looking for scalps amongst deeply unhappy spies who are already being blamed for providing rubbish intelligence, accepting obvious forgeries and endorsing plagiarised material—and who in many cases did not support the decision to go to war anyway.

The Ministry of Defence issued its own preliminary assessment of the Iraq war and its aftermath on the same day as the FAC inquiry and made the damaging admission that neither Britain nor the US had known whether Saddam's commanders would be able to deploy weapons of mass destruction against coalition troops because of limited intelligence.

Attempting to account for the desperate state of Iraq's army as revealed in the conflict *Operations in Iraq 2003: First Reflections* claims, "Only with hindsight was it possible to assess the true state of Iraq's infrastructural, organisational and social collapse, caused by years of official neglect, criminal activity, international sanctions and war damage."

Yet every informed observer without a vested interest in going to war took these painfully obvious factors as their starting point in arguing against the propaganda emanating from Washington and London.

Blair was questioned yesterday, July 8, by the Liaison Committee—made up of the MPs who chair parliament's select committees—over the charge that he, Straw and Hoon exaggerated the threat of WMD. He tried to brazen it out by attacking the FAC report stating, "For me, the jury is not out at all... I have absolutely no doubt at all that we will find evidence of weapons of mass destruction programmes."

But Blair's bravado cannot conceal the full extent of the crisis he faces. One indication of this is that even his political friends are being forced to contemplate the possibility he may fall from power. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof recently commented, "One of the saddest results of our war in Iraq is that it may finish off Tony Blair before Saddam Hussein."

"Everywhere I go in Britain, people dismiss Mr. Blair as President Bush's poodle.... Given that Mr. Blair might end up with time on his hands, perhaps Mr. Bush could hire him as an adviser."



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