

Iraq war lies rebound on Australian PM

Rick Kelly
16 July 2003

Like George Bush and Tony Blair, Australian Prime Minister John Howard faces a mounting political crisis over the lies and fabrications used to justify invading Iraq and his efforts to foist the blame onto the Australian intelligence agencies.

In a remarkable display last week, no less than three Australian intelligence agencies followed the American CIA in declaring that they knew the claims of Iraq seeking to buy uranium in Africa were false, yet failed to inform the government. Far from shoring up the government's credibility, this transparent attempt to shield Howard has only led to further questions as his assertions about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction continue to unravel.

In the lead up to the invasion, the Australian government was an enthusiastic advocate of the US and British allegations concerning the serious threat posed by Iraq's supposed WMD arsenal. One of the most prominent of these claims was that Iraq had sought to purchase uranium from the African nation of Niger, as part of its "reconstituted" nuclear program.

After Bush inserted the allegation in his January 28 State of the Union address, Howard followed suit in a key address to parliament on February 4. "Iraq continues to work on developing nuclear weapons. Uranium has been sought from Africa that has no civil nuclear application in Iraq," he stated. It is now known that this statement was based on a forged document, and that a former US diplomat, Joseph Wilson, notified Washington of the sham in February 2002.

On July 7, a former US State Department official, Greg Theilmann, stated that the State Department's knowledge that the uranium story was based on a crude forgery would have been passed on to the Australian government. Theilmann was head of the strategic proliferation section at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research from 2000 to 2002, and was responsible for analysing all US intelligence on Iraq's nuclear ambitions.

"If the prime minister was reaching the conclusion that Iraq had reconstituted its nuclear weapons program, which in our office was one of the biggest issues of all, well we saw no evidence," Theilmann told the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The State Department's rejection of the forged allegations

"would not have been a secret to the Australian government," he said.

Theilmann's comments appeared to catch the government off guard. A spokesperson for Howard issued a statement denying that the government had made any errors. "There is nothing new in this," he asserted, claiming that "disagreements" between the CIA and the State Department on the veracity of the uranium purchase allegations were well known and uncontroversial.

Later the same day, however, the White House admitted that the African uranium claims in Bush's State of the Union address were false, forcing Howard to quickly change tune. As the White House prepared to force CIA director George Tenet to take responsibility for the falsification, the Australian government called on its Office of National Assessments (ONA) to do likewise.

The result was a rare ONA press release on July 10. "ONA became aware in January 2003 that the State Department was doubtful of the claims that Saddam Hussein had sought uranium from Africa," the carefully worded statement read. "ONA's reporting to the government did not refer to this State Department view and ONA did not inform the government of its awareness of this State Department view."

The ONA is the prime minister's key intelligence body. It analyses the intelligence received from other Australian agencies, such as the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) and the Defence Signals Directorate, as well as information received from foreign agencies, and then reports its findings directly to the prime minister. Yet, it claimed not to have told Howard that his February 4 speech featured a discredited claim.

Former senior ONA analyst Andrew Wilkie, who resigned before the invasion in protest at the lies being told to overcome opposition to the war, immediately dismissed the ONA statement. "It is unbelievable that ONA would not have told the prime minister," Wilkie told the media. "And I find it unbelievable that if they didn't tell the prime minister, and the prime minister said something to the contrary in the House of Reps, that ONA would not have immediately been on the phone to correct it".

The ONA's *mea culpa* was matched the following day by

ASIS, the intelligence arm of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). “Like ONA, DFAT became aware in January 2003 that the State Department was doubtful of claims that Saddam Hussein had sought uranium from Africa,” a DFAT spokesperson told the *Sydney Morning Herald*. This information “did not form part of our advice to the [foreign] minister [Alexander Downer]. We did not specifically brief the minister.”

On July 12, a third intelligence agency, the military’s Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), said it had also known that the uranium story was false. The DIO, which reports to Defence Minister Robert Hill, said that, like the ONA and DFAT, it had failed to pass on its knowledge to anyone in the government.

These statements are completely implausible. If the intelligence agencies’ claims were to be believed, they would represent a damning admission of incompetence that would necessitate an immediate investigative inquiry, and disciplinary action being taken against those responsible.

Instead, Howard, again echoing Bush, expressed full confidence in the intelligence agencies, and attacked those calling for an investigation. “I don’t believe that this incident on its own can be regarded as an illustration that the intelligence services are lacking,” he said. “Some may find it strange of me to say this but I retain enormous confidence in our intelligence agencies”.

Howard’s claim that he had no reason to question his intelligence agencies is more threadbare than that of Bush. If nothing else, the public resignation of ONA analyst Wilkie on the eve of the war should have been the occasion for a complete intelligence review. Instead, however, Howard brushed aside Wilkie’s criticisms and continued to insist that Iraq’s weapons posed as a serious threat. As he prepared to commit Australian forces, the last thing that Howard wanted was to undermine the pretext for an illegal war of aggression against Iraq.

Howard has sought to minimise the significance of the intelligence on the Niger uranium claim, saying that it was just one piece of information in a much broader case for war. But the fact that the government exploited what it knew to be fraudulent intelligence calls into question the government’s entire case for war. There is no reason to believe that any of the evidence concerning Iraq’s weapons programs was more plausible than the Niger uranium allegation.

Three months after the fall of Baghdad, not a single shred of evidence has been found in Iraq to support any of the accusations made by the American, British and Australian governments prior to the invasion. In response to the growing public disquiet, Howard, like Bush and Blair, is engaged in a frantic effort to prevent the whole web of lies

about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction from collapsing.

Howard’s latest ploy, again following on from Bush, is to dismiss the whole debate. “The Australian public has, to a significant degree, moved on from this issue,” he declared. However, an opinion poll published the day before the ONA issued its press release reported that 44 percent of respondents believed the government had misled them on Iraq’s alleged weapons.

In his efforts to defuse the issue, Howard is able to rely on a largely compliant media and the tacit support of the opposition parties. Labor Party leader Simon Crean said this week that the parliamentary inquiry due to commence next week into the intelligence agencies and the false WMD allegations was needed “not ... to rehash the circumstances of whether we should go to war or not in Iraq, but because we face the threat of terrorism, and intelligence gathering is the most effective weapon against terrorists, tracking them down.”

None of the opposition parties want to “rehash” the circumstances leading to war because to do so would reveal their own complicity in promoting the lie that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and the phony character of their opposition to the war. They have readily agreed that the planned parliamentary inquiry will be held behind closed doors, conducted by a government-dominated committee that does not even have the authority to investigate the ONA or DIO.

The inquiry will only examine the quality of intelligence received by the government, and will ignore the critical issue of Howard’s manipulation and fabrication of evidence in an attempt to legitimise a war that was opposed by a large majority of Australians. Such a crude whitewash will not be the end of the matter. Whichever way Howard twists and turns, he confronts the fact that a growing segment of the population does not believe him or the lies he used to justify the US-led invasion.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact