Britain: Whistleblower Kelly's death shakes Blair government

Chris Marsden
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The violent death of Dr. David Kelly on July 17 has become the focus of a major crisis of the entire state apparatus in Britain.

Kelly was the microbiologist employed by the Ministry of Defence who became a whistleblower, telling the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and others of his concerns over the misuse of intelligence material by the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair as part of its efforts to drum up support for war against Iraq.

The government is at the centre of the political storm. A number of key personnel including Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon could be forced to fall on their swords in order to protect Blair himself, but the prime minister's own position is far from secure and his party could be plunged into a leadership contest between Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown.

Still more is at stake than the immediate fate of the government. The Kelly affair has exposed to public scrutiny the depth of conflicts within ruling circles over the Iraq war and the Blair government's overall foreign policy orientation of placing Britain as America's unswerving ally.

A picture has been revealed of a government forced to lie repeatedly in order to take the country to war in the face of overwhelming public opposition, including the biggest antiwar demonstrations in British history, dissent amidst wide layers of the civil service and security forces such as MI6, and a struggle between the government and the BBC in which the survival of one or the other is in question. This internal battle within the state apparatus has now resulted in the death of a leading government advisor.

Kelly is not a minor figure. Before being named as the mole at the centre of a furious row between the government and the BBC, his career had taken him to the very top. He was a former deputy head of the government's biological weapons facility at Porton Down and became the Ministry of Defence's senior advisor on biological defence.

In 1989, Kelly was called in to assist MI6 in debriefing Vladimir Pasechnik, a leading Soviet biochemist and defector. He was the former head of biological inspections in Iraq for the United Nation's mission, Unscom, and had visited Iraq 36 times. He was charged with drafting the historical section of the Blair government's September 24, 2002 security dossier on Iraq.

For such a figure to find himself the target of a government witch-hunt and subsequently die on a lonely hill in Oxfordshire is itself an indication of the gravity of the present crisis.

The government is making strenuous efforts to extricate itself from its present difficulties by attributing blame for Kelly's death to the BBC. This is a continuation of its earlier campaign to cover up its own lies on Iraq's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction.

The Kelly scandal first unfolded when reports by the BBC's Andrew Gilligan at the end of May stated that a senior source involved in drawing up the September 2002 intelligence dossier had accused the government of "sexing it up" by including uncorroborated (and false) claims that Iraq could fire weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes. Prime Minister Tony Blair's director of communications, Alastair Campbell, had been named as the man directly responsible.

In an effort to stem the accusations, Blair convened two parliamentary inquiries, by the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee. Both were intended to exonerate the government. At the same time, Blair rejected calls for an independent judicial inquiry into the charges of manipulated and falsified intelligence.

In an attempt to divert public attention from its failure to find weapons of mass destruction and the deteriorating military situation in Iraq, the government sought to make central the issue of whether or not Campbell had been personally responsible for the 45-minute claim's inclusion in the September dossier, accusing the BBC of mounting a vendetta against him. The Labour government insisted that the BBC name its source, which the corporation refused to do.

When the Foreign Affairs Committee exonerated Campbell, the government took the decision to bring the mole to public attention, and a witch-hunt was launched to uncover him. In an unprecedented move, the government itself, on July 9, named Dr. David Kelly as the BBC's most likely source. Having outed him, it then forced him to testify before both the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee on July 15 and 16. Kelly admitted to the Foreign Affairs Committee that he had met with the BBC's Gilligan, but said he doubted he could be the main source for Gilligan's story.

Kelly disappeared from home on July 17 and was found dead as a result of a slashed wrist in the countryside near his home on July 18.

Following Kelly's death, which was quickly declared a suicide, there was widespread public criticism of the government for having hung Kelly out to dry and placing enormous pressure on him. In the midst of Blair's Asian tour, a reporter asked the prime minister whether he had blood on his hands and did he intend to resign.

In response, the government has ratcheted up its attacks on the BBC, and it has been lent support by large sections of the media, led by Rupert Murdoch's newspapers, but also with the assistance of the pro-labour *Guardian* and others.

Labour's Peter Mandelson blamed Kelly's death on a supposed BBC fixation with discrediting Campbell, and accused the media of "turning itself from judge and jury into a splenetic lynch mob." Gerald Kaufman, chair of parliament's Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, said, "[W]ithout the BBC's pursuit of that story, Dr. Kelly would still be alive today." He went on threaten, "The way this story has been pursued by the BBC and endorsed by the board of governors raises the most profound questions about the nature of the BBC as a public sector, public service, publicly funded organisation."

Murdoch's *Sun* proclaimed, "The BBC is in the gutter." It charged that Gilligan, by standing by his story, has effectively branded Dr. Kelly a liar. "Heads must roll at the BBC," it said, while Political Editor Trevor Kavanagh named BBC Director of News Richard Sambrook and BBC Chairman Gavyn Davies as targets.

Other papers were hardly less transparent in their efforts to come to the

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aid of the Blair government. The *Guardian* complained that the BBC had not taken up the government's supposed "offer of a truce days before Dr. Kelly was named by the Ministry of Defence," and argued that the BBC, by doing so, "might have prevented the suicide of David Kelly."

The *Financial Times* wrote of a "reeling" BBC, in contrast to a government that had "weathered the immediate crisis." But the newspaper may be indulging in wishful thinking.

The BBC has since revealed that it has a tape recording of Kelly telling its journalist Susan Watts of his concerns about the way the government presented Iraq weapons intelligence. It also said that Gilligan's palmtop computer containing contemporaneous notes of his conversation with Kelly was in their possession, and had been locked in a safe since the start of the dispute.

In any case, it is well known that Kelly was not the only figure within the military and intelligence establishment to voice concerns and disagreements with the government over its misuse of intelligence material and its overall policy toward Iraq. He was one of several who were busy leaking to the media at the time, and they have not gone away.

Sections of the Tory press have continued to make the government their central target. Within the Labour Party, former international development secretary Clare Short dismissed criticism of the BBC as "disgraceful" and a "smokescreen." She declared, "This assault on the BBC is just a complete distraction from the main questions about how we got to war in Iraq."

Glenda Jackson MP called for Blair to resign over Kelly's death. "Bullets should be bitten," she said, and "the prime minister should really be reconsidering his position."

The second flank of the government's damage control exercise is its convening of a judicial inquiry into Kelly's death, headed by Lord Hutton, a Law Lord who will become one of the 12 supreme court judges under new government proposals changing the constitution.

Hutton is a conservative figure who was lord chief justice of Northern Ireland between 1988 and 1997, helped the government secure the release of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1999, and decided that the former MI5 agent and whistleblower David Shayler was not acting in the public interest when he exposed illegal activities in the security services, such as a plan to assassinate Libya's Colonel Gaddaffi.

His inquiry is meant to help the government by narrowly focusing on the circumstances leading to Kelly's death and the substance of what Kelly said to Gilligan. Blair has rejected calls for Hutton's inquiry to examine the wider issue of the government's use of intelligence on Iraq, and has likewise turned aside demands for a recall of Parliament. In doing so, Blair somewhat gave the game away when he said of Hutton, "I think it is important that he does what we've asked him to do."

The brutal treatment meted out to Kelly and the strategy of making a frontal assault on the BBC could only be contemplated by a government that felt its back was against the wall.

How does one account for this?

Blair came to power on the basis of broadly held anti-Tory sentiment. He claimed he would redress the social ills of the Thatcher era and initiate a new period of democratic accountability. He promised that his government would be free of the corruption and scandal that had beset the Tories.

He has failed on all counts. The social position of the broad mass of the population has continued to deteriorate. The government's big business policies have led to an ever deeper polarisation between rich and poor, made worse by its steps towards the privatisation of vital services such as education and health.

New Labour is a government without any significant support in the general population. It rests upon a narrow layer of the super-rich and an aspiring layer of the upper middle class. Even more than the Tories, Blair relies on a generally servile media to maintain the illusion of a popular basis for his policies.

Nothing illustrates these political realities more clearly than the war against Iraq. Blair made it a principle and even a badge of honour that his government was not answerable to the popular will, but would act according to his conscience and take the country into war. Blair's "conscience" was guided by his aim of forging an alliance with the Bush administration in order to share in the oil riches of a conquered Iraq and strengthen the hand of British imperialism against its European rivals.

This social and political polarisation is the driving force behind the conflict that has erupted at the heart of the state. Politics has become so narrowly based and the personal role of Blair so pivotal that the traditional avenues through which dissent—even within ruling circles—can be expressed and through which heated disputes can be dissipated have been closed down.

At one time it was de rigueur for the government to consult with the civil service and its security services before launching any major foreign policy initiative. Instead, Blair steamrolled his agenda through and in the process alienated significant layers of the state apparatus, who then felt free to conspire against the government.

Neither Blair nor his critics and political opponents can make a genuine appeal to the public to support their policies, because they all represent social forces hostile to the working class. Consequently, political life takes on an ever more venal character, more reminiscent of the Machiavellian intrigues of a feudal court than a modern system of democratic rule.

Despite the severity of the present crisis, the government enjoys one major political advantage—the absence of any genuine mass organizations of the working class through which the views and interests of working people can find expression. This gives Blair and both his supporters and opponents within the ruling elite vital room for manoeuvre.

The government faces some opposition from the Tories and within their own ranks, but of a truncated and ineffectual character. There is concern that Blair has gone too far in his orientation to Washington, possibly threatening Britain's independent interests and alienating its European allies.

But in the main, there is more agreement than disagreement with the thrust of Blair's pro-US agenda. Few of his critics would wish to seriously endanger the so-called "special relationship" by exposing the fraudulent basis on which the Iraq war was conducted. Moreover, they do not wish the government to fall in a way that would lead to open civil war within the political establishment.

If the conflict remains one in which the only conscious actors are Labour, the Tories, the civil service, the security forces and the pro-business media, various outcomes may be possible, but they will all represent variants of a right-wing character. The working class faces a direct conflict with the party it has traditionally looked to and which it voted into power. There is no force within this party that offers a viable programmatic alternative to Blair's.

As for the trade union bureaucracy, the TUC has maintained its obligatory silence and even the so-called angry squad of union "lefts" have said nothing that would embarrass the government.

A new party is needed that can articulate the independent interests of the working class and end the monopoly of power enjoyed by the political representatives of capital. Exposing the lies surrounding the death of Dr. Kelly will play an important role in educating workers, youth and intellectuals in the need for such a political turn.

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