

Britain: Parliamentary probe exposes lies on Iraqi weapons

Part 1: Clare Short, Robin Cook and Andrew Gilligan

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3 July 2003

The following is the first in a series of articles.

The Foreign Affairs Select Committee investigation into whether Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour government distorted intelligence material to justify its planned war against Iraq is to publish its verdict on July 8. There is every reason to suppose that the Labour-dominated committee in Parliament will make criticisms of the government that stop short of accusing it of lying—a classic fudge. But some of the testimony given to the inquiry makes this difficult. It stands as a damning indictment of the way the government set out to sell a previously determined decision to go to war by claiming that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. In order that this information does not remain buried amidst thousands of pages of undigested transcripts, the *World Socialist Web Site* is publishing a précis of the most important testimony given.

The decision to go to war against Iraq was not only taken behind the backs of the British people and Parliament, but to a large extent even the cabinet was excluded from the discussion.

Evidence given by former cabinet minister Clare Short paints a picture of a small coterie of Blair apparatchiks who were “in charge of policy” as British troops invaded Iraq alongside the United States. The “gang of four”, as the press has dubbed them, are all unelected and owe their positions and generous salaries exclusively to Tony Blair.

According to Short, Blair's close entourage consists of his communications director, Alastair Campbell, Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell, Director of Political and Government relations Baroness Morgan and Foreign Policy Adviser Sir David Manning. “That was the team, they were the ones who moved together all the time. They attended the daily ‘War Cabinet.’ That was the ‘in’ group, that was the group that was in charge of policy,” Short told the committee.

She said the cabinet had never been presented with any papers analysing the risks, dangers, military, political and diplomatic options before the war was launched. Neither had the relevant cabinet body, the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, met to discuss Iraq. “There was never a paper. There was never an analysis of options and there was never an analysis on paper before any Cabinet committee or any meeting and it was all done only verbally” at meetings lasting “something under an hour.”

The paucity of cabinet discussion was not limited to the impending war against Iraq but extends to all major policy areas, according to Short. “The collapse in the decision-making process, not having Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, not having any papers, not considering options, diplomatic and military options, I think is very, very poor and shoddy work and is a deterioration in the quality of British administration which is shocking and this deterioration has been taking place for some time ... and it is not just in relation to Iraq, but it is more generally, on foundation hospitals, top-up fees.”

Short told the committee that the decision to go to war had already been

taken last summer. She said that “three extremely senior people in the Whitehall system” had told her the decision had been made by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair, and the “target date was mid-February [2003] and later extended to March because of a difficulty with the Turks and so on and to give our prime minister a little more time.”

It also emerged that the cabinet did not meet for almost three months last summer, between the end of July and the third week in October, the very timeframe in which Short says the agreement to go to war was made between Blair and Bush.

Answering a question whether there had been a deliberate attempt to emphasise certain aspects of the intelligence reports concerning Iraq and the alleged “weapons of mass destruction” in order to make the threat more credible, Short responded, “To make it more immediate, more imminent, requiring urgent action, yes.”

“I think it is a series of half-truths, exaggerations and reassurances that were not the case to get us into conflict by the spring.”

Short accused Blair of carrying out an “honourable deception” in order to secure support for British participation in the war.

“I believe that the prime minister must have concluded that it was honourable and desirable to back the US in going for military action in Iraq and that it was, therefore, honourable for him to persuade us through the various ruse and devices he used to get us there, so I presume that he saw it as an honourable deception.”

Also addressing the first day of the committee hearing was Robin Cook, a former foreign minister and, until he resigned in March, leader of the House.

Cook asked the committee to consider why there was “such a difference between the claims made before the war and the reality established after the war?... We have found no chemical production plants. We have found no facilities for a nuclear weapon programme. We have found no weapons within 45 minutes of artillery positions.”

He also questioned why UN weapons inspectors had not been allowed back into Iraq. “I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion the reason we do not is because they would confirm Saddam did not have an immediate threatening capability.”

Cook also asked if the absence of weapons of mass destruction undermined the legal basis of the war:

“The opinion of the attorney general is entirely on the justification for war being the need to carry out the disarmament of Saddam Hussein. If he can find no weapons to disarm does that legal opinion still have basis?”

“We went to war. Five to seven thousand civilians were killed. Some British troops were killed. To go to war you need to have a real compelling justification for breaking that taboo which war should necessarily represent and to embark upon wholesale military action.... It is a question of whether you really did have compelling, convincing

evidence posing, as the prime minister expressed it, a current and serious threat. It is plain from what we now know he did not pose a current and serious threat. It is therefore a grievous error of policy to have gone to war on the assumption he was.”

Cook accused the Blair government of “not presenting the whole picture”:

“I fear the fundamental problem is that instead of using intelligence as evidence on which to base the conclusion of a policy, we used intelligence as the basis on which we could justify a policy on which we had already settled.”

Cook was critical of the document produced by the British government in February to support the claim that Saddam Hussein represented an immediate danger to both the UK and the US, which was later shown to have been largely plagiarised from a PhD thesis. This “dodgy dossier” contained very little “that actually represented intelligence of a new, alarming, urgent and compelling threat,” Cook told the committee.

Moreover, “The dodgy dossier was not discussed in Cabinet, and I took part in every cabinet discussion over four months on Iraq and it was almost weekly. I do not recall us discussing this.”

While not overtly accusing Blair and the government of lying, Cook said, “I think it is quite clear that some of the facts put to the House, both in the [first] September dossier and some of the speeches to the House, cannot be reconciled with the facts as we know them on the ground.”

In response to a question, Cook said that if the chemicals used to make weapons of mass destruction existed in Iraq it was curious no one had come forward to show where they were, “since the reward would be immense. They could have their own ranch in Texas if they were to lead us to such a thing at the present time.”

More strenuously than his former cabinet colleague Short, Cook sought to exonerate Blair from any personal culpability:

“I actually have no doubt about the good faith of the prime minister and others engaged in this exercise.... That is not deceit, it is not invention, it is not coming up with intelligence that did not exist, but it was not presenting the whole picture.”

Reporter Andrew Gilligan and the BBC have been accused of dishonest reporting by Blair’s director of communications, Alastair Campbell. Their alleged crime is to have cited an intelligence source in the May 29 and June 4 editions of Radio Four’s *Today* Programme, claiming that Campbell had “sexed up” the September intelligence dossier by insisting on including the claim that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes.

When asked where the claim had come from, Gilligan said it was a single source but was corroborated by other journalists who went to their own sources—“then it was corroborated and we saw similar reports appear in several newspapers in the days after my story.”

He went on, “I am aware of disquiet within the intelligence community over the government’s handling of intelligence material related to Iraq, not just on this particular issue of the September 24 dossier but on others.”

This was confirmed, “From a total of four different people,” who had “spoken to me generally of their concern about Downing Street’s use of intelligence material over the last six months,” Gilligan said. “They spoke to me about the allegations made of links between Saddam and Al-Qaeda. They spoke to me about the so-called ‘dodgy dossier,’ the one produced in February, and they spoke to me about this [September] dossier.”

He described his single source on the 45-minute claim as “one of the senior officials in charge of drawing up the [September] dossier and I can tell you that he is a source of longstanding, well known to me, closely connected with the question of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, easily sufficiently senior and credible to be worth reporting.”

Another source had spoken to Gilligan “about the link being made by the prime minister between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda. He was kind enough to leak me a document on that link which said that there was not

one or there had not been one lately.”

When asked what was the classification of the document he saw, Gilligan replied, “Top secret.”

Gilligan had said on the May 29 “Today” programme that his source said the September dossier “was transformed the week before it was published to make it sexier. The classic example was the statement that WMD were ready for use in 45 minutes. That information was not in the original draft.”

His source said the 45-minute claim “was real information ... but it was included in the dossier against our wishes because it was not reliable. It was a single source and it was not reliable.”

Gilligan added later, “It was not a claim that was in any way made up or fabricated by Downing Street. Another one of the reasons why this story took on the life that it did was that Downing Street denied a number of things which had never been alleged. They denied, among other things, that material had been fabricated. Nobody ever alleged that material had been fabricated.”

The committee had told Gilligan that Foreign Secretary Jack Straw had told them that the “almost identical” claim was made in intelligence material provided to the government. He was asked, “Are you saying that the foreign secretary is lying to this committee? Or will you now acknowledge that your source was incorrect in saying that the 45-minute claim was not based on a genuine assessment of the [Joint Intelligence Committee], fully approved through the [Joint Intelligence Committee] process?”

Gilligan replied, “I note the words ‘almost identical’ in the foreign secretary’s response. I would simply say that it is not my business to say whether the foreign secretary is lying or not. All I would say is that I invested strong credibility in my source, who is a person of impeccable standing on this issue, and whose complaints have been reflected in something like seven or eight newspapers and other media outlets, including other BBC outlets, since my original story and his complaints have also been reflected by named, on the record, former intelligence officers from Australia, from the United States, and also, to some extent, by other members of the House.”

His source had also been “quite cutting about the claim that uranium had been sought from Africa”—a claim that has subsequently been found to be a lie that was based on crudely forged intelligence documents from a foreign country. Gilligan said, “My source believed that the documents on which the allegation rested were forged.”

To be continued



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