

Britain: Parliamentary probe exposes lies on Iraqi weapons

Part 3: Foreign Secretary Jack Straw

Robert Stevens, Richard Tyler
7 July 2003

The following is the conclusion of a three-part series of articles. "Part 1: Clare Short, Robin Cook and Andrew Gilligan" was posted July 3. and "Part 2: Andrew Wilkie and Dr Ibrahim al-Marashi" was published July 4.

The Foreign Affairs Select Committee investigation into whether Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour government distorted intelligence material to justify its war against Iraq is to publish its report today.

From extensive leaks to the press, there is every reason to suppose that the Labour-dominated parliamentary committee will largely exonerate the government. However, some of the testimony given to the inquiry contradicts such a conclusion clearly exposing the way the British 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.

Jack Straw

On June 24 and 27, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FASC) questioned Foreign Secretary Jack Straw in both public and private sessions. Most of the questions concerned the production and content of the two dossiers presented by the British government prior to the war against Iraq.

The documents were announced amid much fanfare, and were supposed to be based on the latest intelligence regarding the possession of "weapons of mass destruction" by the regime of Saddam Hussein. The first dossier, published in September 2002, is entitled *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government*. Among other allegations, it makes the bald claim that Iraq was ready to use deadly weapons of mass destruction "within 45 minutes" of a decision being made by the regime of Saddam Hussein.

The second document, *Iraq: Its Infrastructure of Concealment, Deception and Intimidation*, was released in February 2003. It has earned the soubriquet the "dodgy dossier" due to it being largely plagiarised from the 1990 thesis of a California PhD student. Deliberate changes were made to its content by the Blair government in order to further demonise Saddam Hussein and Iraq, in preparation for war.

Regarding the publication in February 2003 of the second "dodgy dossier", Straw claimed that the government had made "innocent errors" and that the document was "flawed". He described its early incarnation as a "briefing paper" and its production as a "complete Horlicks".

He told the committee that there had been no attribution of sources in the February 3 document because this had been "dropped out as it went through processes, literally through word-processing." He went on to defend its contents claiming, "All that said and notwithstanding the very substantial error that the sources of the document were not attributed at all

and that there were changes made, for example 'opposition groups' to 'terrorist organisations', the accuracy of the document I do not think is seriously at issue."

Questioned on the significance of the 45-minute allegation, Straw said, "I do not happen to regard the 45 minute statement having the significance which has been attached to it, neither does anybody else, indeed nobody round this table, if I say so with respect. It was scarcely mentioned in any of the very large number of debates that took place in the House, evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, all of the times I was questioned on the radio and television, scarcely mentioned at all."

Committee member Sir John Stanley pointed out that Prime Minister Tony Blair himself had in fact highlighted the 45-minute claim in the foreword to the dossier. Straw sought to downplay this by stating, "Of course, but so were many other things highlighted in the foreword."

Contrary to Straw's testimony to the FASC, the only categorical statement Blair made in his 12-paragraph introduction, based on the so-called "intelligence" presented in the dossier, was the "45-minute" claim. He wrote:

"Intelligence reports make clear that he [Saddam] sees the building up of his WMD capability, and the belief overseas that he would use these weapons, as vital to his strategic interests, and in particular his goal of regional domination. And the document discloses that his military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them."

Straw later told the committee, "The simple fact of the matter is apart from anything else the 45-minute claim was a supporting fact in the decision to go to war but it was not remotely a central fact in the decision to go to war... The 45 minutes and still more about the provenance of the February dossier is a huge diversion. These were not remotely central to the decision to go to the war, which was the nature of your inquiry. I say that to you with respect, chairman, historians I think would not give you an alpha marking if you suggested that Mr Gilligan's claim on the 45 minutes was the basis on which we went to war, because it was not."

For once the foreign secretary is speaking truthfully. The 45-minute claim was not the "central" reason the government decided to go to war. The claim, by the government's own admission was based on the intelligence of a single uncorroborated Iraqi source, was for public consumption in order to underpin the lie that Saddam represented an imminent and immediate danger.

No evidence of WMD

Labour Member of Parliament Eric Illsley put the point to Straw that that if such weapons could be deployed within 45 minutes, "They could be found pretty quickly during a battle or during the investigations afterwards. It has been suggested to us that the reliance on this 45 minutes claim tends to suggest that it would have been very easy to find such

weapons if they actually existed.”

Committee member David Chidgey asked Straw, “What evidence has been found in Iraq of weapons of mass destruction since the end of the conflict?”

Straw attempted to evade a direct response saying, “Illegal programmes to extend the range of al-Samoud missiles borne out by UNMOVIC findings of instructions from al Samoud. The concealment of documents associated with WMD programmes. You may have seen, we have not had a chance ourselves to fully assess it, a report yesterday by a senior scientist involved in the Iraqi nuclear programme about documentation that he had hidden in his own garden and how the Saddam regime indeed maintained a policy of trying to improve and develop their nuclear programme.”

This prompted Chidgey to intervene again asking, “you are talking so far about plans, proposals and programmes. You just said they were talking about plans to develop, has there been any hard evidence found in Iraq post-conflict of the existence of weapons of mass destruction?”

Straw was forced to concede, “Mr Chidgey, whether there has been a physical find of a chemical or a biological compound ready for use in some delivery system the answer to that, as you know, is no.”

More than two months after President Bush effectively declared the war in Iraq to be won no weapons of mass destruction have been found. This is the case, despite Straw’s admission to the committee that as of June 21, more than 240 separate sites have been thoroughly examined.

The 45-minute claim (reprise)

When Straw returned to give evidence on June 27, the committee again spent hours questioning him about the 45-minute claim contained in the February dossier. Much of the interrogation concerned the exact sequence of the production of the document, and at what stage the 45-minute claim entered the draft.

The following exchange is illustrative:

Richard Ottaway: On this point about when the 45-minute claim first appeared Mr [Alastair] Campbell [Blair’s top spin-doctor] told us not once but twice on Wednesday that it appeared in the first draft of the report, do you agree with that?

Mr Straw: The first draft of? The one produced in September, yes I think so, because we had the JIC report in early September. Mr Ottaway, the crucial point about the 45-minute claim is that it came from intelligence through the JIC, which was assessed to be credible.

Richard Ottaway: That is not the question, there are two points here: When did it go in? Was it credible?

Mr Straw: We will deal with the narrative in the private session.

Chairman: The question put by Mr Ottaway was rather different, Mr Ottaway would you repeat it?

Richard Ottaway: I am asking when it appeared in the draft of the September document.

Mr Straw: I can give you the date.

Richard Ottaway: Was it in the first draft?

Mr Ricketts [a senior civil servant at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office]: It was as soon as it was received and assessed.

Richard Ottaway: Was it in the first draft?

Mr Straw: As we will explain in the private session the drafts of information to be made publicly available of some kind about Iraq went back to the early side of the summer, we have already made this clear. Then drafts of the document that was being published were being prepared. This information came to the attention of the JIC [Joint Intelligence Committee], as I recall, in early September and from that date and the assessment by the JIC, that intelligence was accurately reflected in the dossier.

Richard Ottaway: It was added later.

Mr Straw: That is what I am trying to tell you.

Richard Ottaway: The answer is that it was added later and it was not in

the first draft.

Mr Straw: Again, we can go into detail.

Richard Ottaway: This is a very important.

Mr Straw: Mr Ottaway, it is a completely trivial point, with great respect to you.

Richard Ottaway: It is one you have spent the last 30 minutes refuting.

Mr Straw: It is not remotely material. The allegation was not that it appeared in the first draft rather than the second draft, let us be clear about that, the allegation was that the 45-minute claim was not properly sourced or corroborated and was then “sexed-up” in the final document.

And so on (and on) before Straw finally states:

“We did not get the intelligence and it was not assessed until early September, palpably it could not have been included in earlier drafts if we did not know about it.”

Testimony from senior civil servant at the Foreign Office, William Ehrman, who accompanied Straw, depicted the convoluted drafting process that had produced both dossiers, ostensibly under the direction of the Chairman of Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). Ehrman explained that the JIC chairman worked not only with “assessment staff but also there were people from other departments who came to a mass of meetings throughout that month [September 2002] producing that document.”

This process could clearly provide an avenue for the government to influence the production of the documents, through the “people from other departments” attending a “mass of meetings”. And it also presented the government with almost perfect deniability, as no minister, nor indeed the PM’s Director of Communications Alastair Campbell, was directly involved in drafting the documents.

The toothlessness of the FASC inquiry was underscored when committee chairman Donald Anderson asked Straw, “Why cannot the Committee see the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee” and question him about the drafting of the two dossiers.

Straw responded, “Because, chairman, what you are seeking to do is embroil me in a turf war between the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee. You know as well as I do the appropriate body to deal with the details of intelligence is the ISC, they are set up by parliament, they are colleagues of people in this room from all parties.”

The Intelligence Security Committee is in reality created by statute and is not a parliamentary committee. The prime minister, to whom it reports in private, appoints its members.

In time-honoured fashion, the British parliament and its committees are being used to cover up for the dirty dealings of the government.

Concluded



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