

The Hutton Inquiry: Blair's testimony deepens government crisis

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Prime Minister Tony Blair told the Hutton inquiry into the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly that he would have been forced to resign if allegations that the government had “sexed up” intelligence to justify war against Iraq were true. His statement points to the gravity of the crisis facing the government, which his testimony did nothing to alleviate. Indeed, the day after he spoke, his communications director, Alastair Campbell, chose to announce his own resignation.

Blair lied to the British public in order to drag the country into an illegal war of aggression. And no matter what interpretation is placed upon the mass of evidence relating to Kelly's death, it remains indisputable that—three months after US and British forces secured unrestricted access to Iraq—not a trace of alleged weapons of mass destruction has been found.

The prime minister was never called on to explain himself over this fundamental issue. The remit of the Hutton Inquiry is heavily prescribed. So the questions of James Dingemans QC, Lord Hutton's counsel, never touched on issues outside of the circumstances leading up to the supposed suicide of Kelly on July 18, and the government's row with the BBC and its reporter Andrew Gilligan for their citing of Kelly's claim that the September 2002 intelligence dossier on Iraq had been distorted.

Nevertheless Blair was obliged to give some account of his actions and was unable to do so without resorting to a series of evasions and lies.

His testimony can be divided into two key areas: questions relating to the September 2002 dossier and the run-up to war, and those relating to Kelly.

* Explaining the background to the September dossier, Blair claimed, “After 11 September [2001] there was a renewed sense of urgency on the question of rogue states and weapons of mass destruction and the link with terrorism.”

This is patently false. There is ample evidence that the terror attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were seized on by the Bush administration to implement its predetermined agenda of establishing US global hegemony, above all its control of the oil-rich Middle East.

* Asked why plans for an intelligence dossier on the threat from weapons of mass destruction had been changed in March 2002 from one dealing with four countries to one with an exclusive focus on Iraq, Blair claimed, “Iraq was a special case. It was in breach of UN resolutions. It had a history of using weapons of mass destruction against its own people.”

But everyone knows that Iraq was a special case only because it was the favoured target of the Bush administration. It had been subjected to 11 years of inspections and sanctions and had clearly been denuded of whatever weapons capacity it had once possessed as has been confirmed by the subsequent failure to find any.

* Blair claimed that the dossier had not been published in March 2002 because “I took the view that it would inflame the situation too much in order to publish it at this stage.”

The prime minister tried to portray himself as a voice of moderation when it is a matter of record that he had agreed with Bush that he should spearhead the campaign to secure United Nations and European Union backing for war with Iraq. The dossier was not published in March because the US was still bogged down in Afghanistan, faced substantial opposition to its Middle Eastern ambitions and had no real case against Iraq. Kelly, who was Britain's top weapons inspector and was charged with drafting the historical sections of what came to be the September dossier, told the BBC's Gilligan that the March draft had nothing new in it.

* Blair claimed that the dossier was released in September because “there was a tremendous amount of information and evidence coming across my desk as to the weapons of mass destruction and the programmes associated with it that Saddam had.”

Emails released to the inquiry in fact show how the government was making frantic last-minute appeals for any information that could be used to strengthen the dossier. Its content was so flimsy that it relied heavily on the now notorious claim that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes. Not only did this claim emanate from a single source, an Iraqi general, but it was relayed to MI6 as hearsay and only related to ordinary battlefield weaponry and not long-range missiles that could target Cyprus, as was claimed.

* Blair declared that the aim of the dossier was not to make the case for war but to “disclose the reason for our concern and the reason why we believed this issue had to be confronted.”

This claim is simply ludicrous. No one was more energetic than he in making the case for war. He has admitted that the dossier came about as a result of a telephone conversation with President George W. Bush in which they agreed that they must determine what needed to be done and ensure that it happened. Vice President Dick Cheney had publicly declared America's intent to launch a preemptive attack on Iraq, causing international uproar.

Blair issued the September dossier in order to combat such criticisms and reinforce his claim that Iraq was a “real and unique threat.” He made clear his intentions by pledging that Britain was prepared to pay the “blood price” for its alliance with the US.

When it came to the circumstances surrounding the identification of Kelly as the source for Gilligan’s May 29 report on disquiet within the security services over the government’s misuse of intelligence material, Blair had little choice but to accept responsibility. Too much has emerged during the inquiry for him to plausibly deny that he was responsible for releasing Kelly’s name to the media and then using him as the government’s star witness against the BBC before the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee.

* Blair told the inquiry that he took “full responsibility” for the decision to out Kelly, but that was as far as his efforts to tell the truth went. And even this only highlights the lies he told previously. Immediately following the scientist’s death Blair had told journalists during his trip to the Far East that he “emphatically” denied authorising the leaking of Kelly’s name.

* The lies continued when Blair gave his supposed explanations for what took place between June 30 when Kelly told his line manager at the MoD that he was the likely source of Gilligan’s story and July 15 when he appeared before the FAC. Blair said that the BBC’s report had gone to the heart of the government’s credibility. He added, “We issued a strong denial, which did not really go anywhere.”

Blair turns reality on its head. It was not a single report by the BBC that called the government’s credibility into question. Its credibility was already virtually nonexistent for having launched a war despite massive public opposition. It declined even further with the subsequent failure to find evidence of Iraqi WMD programmes. The attack on the BBC was mounted in order to divert attention from these broader questions into a demand that the BBC prove that Campbell had personally inserted the 45-minute claim in the dossier. This was something the BBC had never alleged and which was a distortion of what Kelly himself had told Gilligan, which was that the allegation had been used despite it being of questionable provenance.

* Blair’s next task was to provide some sort of rationale for why Kelly’s name was firstly concealed and then released to the media prior to his appearance before the FAC and the ISC. To justify these gyrations, he painted a scenario of a government placed in a quandary over what was the right thing to do. “What did you do?” the prime minister asked rhetorically. “Did you inform the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee immediately, which is one possibility and which I have no doubt afterwards people would have said to us we should have done. Did you try and get greater clarity of whether this was indeed the source or not? So how did you handle this?... We handled this by the book, in the sense of with the advice of civil servants.”

Blair portrayed himself as having been reluctantly persuaded by his advisers to name Kelly, largely based on his belief that the name would come out anyway and that Kelly himself accepted this.

This is the most anodyne presentation possible of the shady goings-on over the two weeks in which Kelly was subjected to

days of interrogation and briefings by his superiors over exactly what he should say to the FAC and while it was also made clear to the FAC what it could and could not ask. The inquiry has taken testimony and evidence from a number of sources that have made clear that Blair’s first response of concealing Kelly’s name would have been adopted if the scientist had stuck to his critical stance and backed up Gilligan. Two things decided the government on naming Kelly—the FAC had issued its report exonerating the government, and Kelly had been persuaded to lie about what he had told Gilligan and to declare his support for the general tenor of the September dossier.

Blair’s testimony only served to highlight the disjuncture between official politics and the broad mass of the working class. His argument failed to impress those members of the public who had queued all night to see him give evidence. And even sections of the media normally sympathetic to the government concluded that he had lost the trust of the electorate.

The *Independent* called it “An assured performance that has not dispelled the lingering suspicions” that the government had misused intelligence. “What Mr. Blair seems not to appreciate is that the reason it lingers is not that it has been insufficiently denied but because in essence, if not in all the minutiae, the public believes it to be true,” the paper said.

The *Guardian* commented, “Mr. Blair handled his morning in the witness box with his usual great skill. But unless he understands why he was there, it may do him little long term good.” It was not Kelly who was responsible for the government’s crisis but, “George Bush, whose policies have ripped the government’s political credibility apart.”

The *Financial Times* declared that trust in Blair “has diminished for good reasons, not a flawed BBC report.” It said of Blair’s evidence that it “stretches the credulity of a reasonable person. For all his petulant claims to the contrary, it was not the BBC report that damaged his standing with the British public and the international community. Rather, it was the failure to find the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that he had insisted were a clear and present threat.... This is the central problem Mr. Blair faces. For him, none of the revelations in the Hutton inquiry is a resigning issue but the public has cause to feel Mr. Blair and his government did not play with a straight bat in the run up to the war, and is unlikely to trust his judgement so readily in the future.”



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