

# Britain: the political issues underlying the Hutton Inquiry

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The August 11 opening of Lord Hutton's judicial inquiry into the death of government scientist Dr. David Kelly is the outcome of a profound conflict within the British ruling elite and its state apparatus. The conflict has taken the somewhat bizarre form of an open struggle between the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair and the British Broadcasting Corporation, a state institution that has long functioned as the semi-official voice of Britain's corporate and political establishment.

The fact that the government so directly attacked the broadcaster's credibility after it reported allegations of inflated claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and thereby set off a vitriolic and public row, underscores the explosive character of the tensions that have built up within Britain's ruling circles.

Kelly, whose death has been pronounced a suicide, was himself a significant figure within the state apparatus. The scientist's body was discovered in woodland on July 18, just days after he was "outed" as the source of the BBC's allegations that the Blair government had "sexed up" its September, 2002 dossier on Iraqi WMD to bolster the case for war.

A senior adviser to the Ministry of Defence on biological weapons, Kelly was a key player in Britain's decade-long provocations against Iraq. As a former head of biological inspections for the United Nation's weapons inspections mission in Iraq, UNSCOM, he had made some 36 trips to the country and played a leading role in interrogating Iraqi scientists. He had earned a reputation as "the most feared" inspector, and a "truly hard man." (Cited in *Plague Wars*, T. Mangold and J. Goldberg, Pan Books).

Kelly was so trusted by the powers-that-be that he was charged with drafting the historical section of the September dossier and, despite having access to secret intelligence information, was able to freely interact with journalists. The gravity of the death of such a high-

ranking individual in suspicious circumstances—in his final e-mail to *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller, Kelly had warned of "dark actors playing games"—is underlined by the list of witnesses that are to be called to give evidence before the Hutton Inquiry.

These include Blair (only the second serving prime minister in history to appear before a judicial inquiry), his director of communications, Alastair Campbell, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, leading officials from the Military of Defence and Britain's intelligence services, civil servants, and numerous journalists and broadcasters, including Gavyn Davies, chairman of the BBC's Board of Governors.

Despite Hutton's insistence that the tribunal will be independent and public it would be naïve to believe that his inquiry will provide the public with a truthful and uncensored account of Kelly's death and the events leading up to it.

Hutton has stipulated that his investigation will be narrowly confined to the immediate events leading up to the discovery of the scientist's body, with the sole purpose of uncovering whether Kelly was the source of leaks to the BBC and others over the September dossier, and whether, having been exposed, he came under such pressure that he was driven to take his own life.

Witnesses will not be cross-examined during their first appearance before the tribunal. Only after Hutton has decided who should be questioned more closely will cross-examination take place, in the inquiry's second stage, but only after those to be called back have been informed of the criticisms against them. Even then, the "extent of that examination and cross-examination will be confined to what I think is helpful to the Inquiry," Hutton has declared.

The inquiry will not examine the issue of fundamental importance that lies at the heart of the crisis: namely, that the Blair government made false and deceptive claims

about Iraqi WMD and thereby traduced democratic norms in order to join the US in an illegal, pre-emptive war. This assault on democratic rights is compounded by the fact that Blair took the country into war in defiance of the overwhelming opposition of the British people.

The narrow parameters announced by Hutton for the inquiry suggest that the investigation was convened in the first place as a means of containing the factional warfare that had erupted within the state apparatus, and preventing it from spiraling out of control. Hutton's probe was announced within hours of the discovery of Kelly's body. It is safe to assume that the decision to launch the inquiry under the auspices of a trusted official followed feverish, behind-the-scenes discussions at the highest levels of the ruling elite over the best means to cover up the events leading up to the invasion of Iraq.

Differences between the intelligence services and the Blair government over the decision to go to war with Iraq—compounded by the post-war failure to find WMD and growing resistance from the Iraqi people—became the flash point for a whole series of conflicts that had been developing over a protracted period.

In essence, these concern the basic strategy of British imperialism—above all, whether Britain should continue its role as America's loyal but junior partner, or orient itself in a more determined manner towards Europe. These issues have long vexed the British ruling class and divided the establishment. That they should spill over in such a way as to openly split the state apparatus is bound up with profound social and political processes.

The unprecedented social polarisation that began under Thatcher's Conservative government in the 1980s has continued and deepened under Blair. At one end of society a small elite has accumulated vast wealth, while at the other end, the broad mass of the population has seen its living standards stagnate or decline. Growing economic inequality at home has been accompanied by increasing militarism abroad, a process that has reached its apogee under Blair, who in seven years in office has involved Britain in one war after another, from the Balkans to Afghanistan and Iraq.

The traditional norms of democratic procedure have been vitiated. Alienated from the broad masses, the old bourgeois parties have atrophied into little more than adjuncts of the state bureaucracy. The Conservative Party is a moribund rump, whilst Labour's disavowal of any connection with the social interests of workers has led to the erosion of its former working class base.

Not only is government increasingly unable to draw on

popular support for its policies, it is more and more reluctant to put them to the test of public opinion. For Blair, the only opinion that counts is that of the powerful corporate elites and their media mouthpieces, who promoted him into power and have kept him there to do their bidding.

The old relations and structures that upheld the rule of British capital for decades are breaking down. In the insulated and rarified atmosphere of official politics, all manner of intrigues and subjective hatreds can thrive and erupt under the force of external pressures. Such a point has now been reached. Compounding the internationally destabilising impact of the Bush administration's "war against terror" is a growing world economic crisis that is directly impacting on Britain and undermining Blair's reputation as a safe pair of hands for the corporate elite.

The Hutton Inquiry is the latest in a series of judicial probes—including the Scarman Inquiry into inner-city riots in 1981 and the 1993 Scott Inquiry into the clandestine sale of arms to Iraq—which, under the pretext of getting to the truth, have served to conceal it.

This does not necessarily mean Hutton will simply whitewash the government and the prime minister. There will be a cover-up, but it remains to be seen if Blair will be its beneficiary. For the ruling elite there is always the danger that such a crisis can become a catalyst for setting off social contradictions and precipitating political upheavals. Under such conditions, sacrificing a government in order to preserve the overall interests of the state is not without precedent.

During the Watergate scandal in the US in the 1970s, Congress was compelled to hold public hearings in an attempt to contain damaging revelations about the Nixon administration's abuse of power. In the end, a consensus emerged within US ruling circles that, in the general interests of capitalist rule, Nixon had to go.

The most important issues in the current crisis go beyond its immediate impact on Blair. The more profound issues concern the de facto political disenfranchisement of the broad mass of the people and the threat to the democratic rights of the working class that arises from the existing economic and political system as a whole.



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