Britain: Leading Tory calls for inquiry into Iraq war

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Last week's unconvincing performance by Prime Minister Tony Blair before the Hutton inquiry into Dr David Kelly's death, and the rapidly deteriorating situation within Iraq, has caused the first major breach in the political consensus established between Labour and the opposition parties over the Iraq war.

Conservative Lord Michael Heseltine, who was deputy prime minister and defence minister in Margaret Thatcher's governments, has called for the convening of a new inquiry focusing on the government's claims concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Speaking on BBC radio's *Today* programme he complained that the heavily prescribed remit of the inquiry, which is to investigate the immediate circumstances surrounding Kelly's death, was aimed at "serving this government" by diverting from the real issues at stake.

Referring to the tens of thousands of pages of documents, letters and emails that have been released during the inquiry, Heseltine said, "For several weeks we have had what in historic terms is really trivial exposure of who said what and who sent emails to whoever.

"The real issue is the historic issue. British troops are dying in Iraq because we were told there were weapons of mass destruction that could be imminently deployed." The failure to uncover evidence of such weapons was the "real scandal that underlies this government's performance and this is where a full inquiry should now be directed," he said.

Heseltine followed up his remarks with an article in the *Guardian* newspaper, September 1, under the headline "Kelly's death was Blair's lifeline".

Kelly's apparent suicide after he was outed as BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan's source for claims the government had "sexed up" intelligence documents to justify war had been seized on by the government to avoid a more "far-reaching inquiry", he wrote.

"Dr Kelly's death is a personal tragedy, but it is not an event that will determine history. Lord Hutton will conclude his report. A few knuckles will be rapped and a grateful government will express its thanks," he wrote.

Heseltine made clear that he had supported the war and fully backed Blair's aim of using it to establish Britain as the most faithful ally of the United States. "I have long held Pax Americana in high regard. The US has contributed mightily to the peace of the world over the past half-century. Nobody fought with more tenacity than I to deploy US cruise missiles in the UK," he said.

But he cautioned, "In 1943 Churchill warned the US that with great power comes great responsibility. As the undisputed leader of the liberal democracies, it has to be seen as the upholder of the rule of law, for that is the only guardian of the freedoms which it rightly claims to represent."

The absence of any factual evidence to substantiate the case against Iraq jeopardised this claim, he continued.

"British troops are dying. Their professionalism and their bravery must make strong men humble. They act in our name. That puts upon our shoulders the responsibility to ask this of them only if the case is proven."

"We are engaged in a battle for the hearts and minds of a constituency far wider than our domestic electorates, important though they are. Sane and moderate Muslim opinion is a vital factor in the unfolding history of our times. In the absence of the evidence that could give credibility to our actions this government can restore trust only by opening the record for the public scrutiny of a judicial inquiry."

Heseltine is correct in his criticisms of the Hutton inquiry, which has been set up with the purpose of covering over how Blair and his government traduced democratic norms in order to drag an unwilling country into an illegal war. But what has caused him to speak out now, after weeks in which the official parties, backed by the press, had done their utmost to present the inquiry as bona fide?

In the first instance, Heseltine has smelled political blood and is determined to make use of the government's mounting difficulties. Despite the circumscribed nature of his questioning, Blair's appearance before the inquiry did nothing to restore his government's credibility. The press claimed that the prime minister had acquitted himself well, but the verdict of members of the public who had queued for hours to gain access to the inquiry was overwhelmingly negative. Their views were repeated across the country, as polls showed the vast majority of the population believed Blair and his government to be liars and that few had any confidence the inquiry would arrive at the

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truth.

But Heseltine is also articulating growing concerns in ruling circles that—with respect to Iraq, the Middle East and British foreign policy in its entirety—Blair has navigated them into dangerous waters due to his slavish adherence to the dictates of Washington.

Writing in the *Times*, September 1, William Rees Mogg confirmed the general level of public scepticism towards the inquiry. Hutton's findings would not "necessarily change the public opinion that is being formed."

Events within Iraq would play a key role in this, he continued. "The future of Iraq is bound to have a dominating influence on the judgement eventually formed of Mr Blair's decision to go to war. It will therefore decide public opinion about the argument that he used to justify that decision. Iraq is the reality."

And this reality looks extremely bleak. Fifty British soldiers have now been killed in Iraq, 14 since President Bush announced on May 1 that the war was officially over—a figure proportionately higher than the 65 US troops who have been killed during the same period.

On August 30, a car bomb in the city of Najaf killed an estimated 100 worshippers at the Imam Ali mosque. Just 10 days earlier, a truck-bomb attack claimed 23 lives at the Baghdad headquarters of the United Nations. The UN bombing, in turn, came on the heels of an August 7 bomb attack on the Jordanian embassy that killed 19.

British and US troops are being sucked into a quagmire of their governments' own making—facing a hostile population, with the prospect of years of occupation at the cost of millions of pounds and untold lives.

These events make even more imperative the organisation of a thorough, independent and public investigation into the lies and conspiracies that led up to the war and a reckoning with those found political responsible.

But Heseltine's call for a new inquiry, which has been taken up by the Liberal Democrats and others, does not fulfil this criteria. Faced with the discrediting of one whitewash, Heseltine is proposing a new, more improved version.

Two things make this clear. As Heseltine admits, the Tories were fully 100 percent behind the war. Whilst he now cites the "rule of law" as the benchmark for democracy, his party stood full square behind the government as it dispensed with all precepts of international law and rode roughshod over popular sentiment both in Britain and abroad to go to war.

An inquiry whose remit was informed by the Tories would not therefore differ fundamentally from that established by the government. Whilst it may be prepared to go further in its criticisms of Blair and others, its objective would also be to cover up the real reasons behind the attack on Iraq, as well as the decades long history of imperialist intrigue by Britain and others against that country. (It should be noted that Heseltine does not mention the word "oil" once.)

This is clear in the model that Heseltine gives for the type of inquiry now needed: that established by Thatcher into the Malvinas/Falkland Islands war of 1982 between Britain and Argentina, following allegations that her government had ordered the sinking of an Argentine cruiser in an effort to provoke hostilities.

The *Belgrano* had been moving away from the islands and was outside a 200-mile "exclusion zone"—imposed by the British—when Thatcher ordered the torpedo attack that killed 323 Argentine service personnel. Leaked documents from the Ministry of Defence indicated that the sinking was aimed at stopping peace negotiations then underway between Britain and Argentina.

Heseltine claims that the composition of this inquiry—it was led by Lord Franks, a leading public servant and included two former Labour and two former Tory ministers—made it a more rigorous and challenging body. In truth, the inquiry took evidence behind closed doors, and its findings exonerated the government of the charge, stating, "we would not be justified in attaching any criticism or blame to the present government for the Argentine Junta's decision to commit its act of unprovoked aggression in the invasion of the Falklands Islands".

No one was held to account and Thatcher went on to use the jingoist fervour around the war to win a second term in office.

The official parties, whether Labour, Tory or Liberal Democrat, are the political representatives of a ruling elite for whom war and military aggression are the preferred means for safeguarding its imperialist interests. None of them can be entrusted with establishing the truth behind the war against Iraq.

Working people must take up the demand for a genuine investigation into the government's lies and misinformation, as part of an independent political movement. This must be coupled with the demand for the immediate withdrawal of all British forces from Iraq and an end to the occupation.

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