

Hutton Inquiry: Blair government's lies on Iraqi WMD unravel

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6 September 2003

Testimony from two weapons experts from the Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS), attached to the British Ministry of Defence, has dealt a body-blow to the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Appearing September 3 before the inquiry by Lord Hutton into the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly, both made damning criticisms of the September 2002 intelligence dossier on Iraq claiming that government “spin merchants” had exaggerated the threat posed by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. They confirmed BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan’s assertion that the critical comments on the dossier that Kelly made to him reflected broader concerns within the intelligence services.

The high profile of both witnesses seems to indicate that Kelly, whose job remit included briefing the media, had not acted as a maverick but had been given a nod and a wink indicating that he should make these concerns known. This would best explain why he felt betrayed when he was publicly singled out as Gilligan’s source.

The DIS is charged with analysing intelligence provided by the British spy agency MI6 for the Ministry of Defense (MoD).

Dr. Brian Jones, now retired, was at the time of the dossier’s preparation in charge of scientists working at the DIS. He said he feared that assessments of the Iraqi threat were being “over-egged” in the dossier and that these concerns were shared by all of his staff. Kelly, for all practical purposes, was treated as a member of the DIS and could regularly go into the secure area and attend its meetings. Jones had spoken to Kelly about their shared concerns.

Regarding drafts of the dossier produced up until September 19, Jones said: “My concerns were that Iraq’s chemical weapons and biological weapons capabilities were not being accurately represented in all regards in relation to the available evidence.

“In particular, I was told that there was no evidence significant production had taken place, either of chemical warfare agents or of chemical weapons.”

Describing the term WMD as a “convenient catch all,” he said it was now thought weapons referred to in the dossier were only small calibre munitions.

Jones had returned from holiday on September 18, 2002 to be told by his staff of their concerns. “There were certainly higher pressures than would normally apply to any particular single piece of work ... it was exceptional in that regard.”

His team had suggested changes to the dossier, but they were not accepted. He cited claims of continued Iraqi production of chemical weapons as an example of “over-egging,” and attributed this to the involvement of government “communications people.” This was the department headed by Alastair Campbell, whom Kelly had told Gilligan was responsible for “sexing up” the dossier.

Jones said that “there was an impression that they [Downing Street press office] were involved in some way.”

On the central controversial claim that Iraq could launch WMD in 45 minutes, he expressed his own criticisms: “My concerns were that Iraq’s chemical weapons and biological weapons capabilities were not being accurately represented in all regards in relation to the available evidence.” The single source which had made the now discredited claim (an Iraqi general) was passing on “second-hand information” and his motive may have been to influence rather than inform.

On September 19, 2002, five days before the dossier was published, Jones had convened a meeting of the DIS in which it was clear that disagreements remained. He had written a minute to his director making clear there were problems with the JIC process of reviewing the draft. Tony Cragg, the deputy chief of defence intelligence, did not raise the points at the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), while Jones’s immediate superior’s sole reply was to say “thank you.”

Jones explained, “I think there was an impression that there was an influence there outside the intelligence community.”

September 19 was the last time the DIS had any involvement with the dossier.

Jones was asked by Lord Hutton’s counsel, James Dingemans QC, if there had been a full meeting of the JIC to consider the final draft of the dossier. He said the full JIC never met to sign off on the final draft and it was passed by a subcommittee, which was highly unusual.

The JIC is made up of representatives of all the intelligence agencies, including MI6 (to which JIC head John Scarlett is affiliated) and the DIS. That it never approved the final draft is devastating, given that a central plank of the government’s defence of its lies is the claim that the document was “owned” by Scarlett specifically and by the JIC as a whole.

The “owned” phrase was used repeatedly by Prime Minister Tony Blair in his testimony to the inquiry to conceal the fact that the document’s real authors were the government and their stooges in MI6.

The government was further embarrassed by the release of minutes from a meeting held in Scarlett’s office just days before the dossier was released on September 24. Under the heading “Ownership of the Dossier,” it included a bulleted point reading “Ownership lay with No 10” (Blair’s Downing Street residence).

One of the main reasons why Jones and others seem to have been angered is because MI6 had broken with protocol in its dealings with the DIS and refused to share intelligence. Faced with even friendly criticism and suggestions, the government decided it should bypass normal procedures so the dossier could be issued before the reconvening of Parliament and used to intimidate and silence critics of

the drive to war.

Drafts had been produced on September 19, 20 and 24, but the last meeting of the JIC took place on September 18. Meanwhile, Campbell had made 15 suggested changes to the dossier and wrote its foreword in its entirety.

A “Mr. A” gave his evidence anonymously. He was a colleague of Kelly employed in the MoD’s counter-proliferation and arms control department and acted as a weapons inspector in Iraq.

He explained that Kelly was the author of fully 12 to 14 of the amendments to the dossier proposed by the DIS. He personally had been concerned about the dossier focusing on claims that phosgene produced at Iraq’s Al-Qa’qa plant was key evidence of a return to chemical weapons manufacture when it was perfectly legitimate from the standpoint of the factory’s commercial remit and phosgene had never been used in weapons by Iraq.

Mr. A said he sent Kelly an email on September 25 saying the plant was too small to be interesting. He wrote, “You will recall (*name blanked out*) admitted they were grasping at straws.”

He concluded with the remark: “Another example supporting our view that you and I should have been more involved in this than the spin-merchants of this administration.... Let’s hope it turns into tomorrow’s chip wrappers...”

Mr. A also said the claim that Iraq’s weapons could be deployed in 45 minutes “was not perhaps a statement that ought to be included” in the dossier.

He told the inquiry, “The perception was that the dossier had been round the houses several times in order to try to find a form of words which could strengthen certain political objectives.”

He added, “The impression I had was that on September 19 the shutters were coming down on this particular paper ... our reservations about the dossier were not being reflected in the final version.”

Blair responded to the latest revelations with an attempt to stonewall the media. At his regular monthly press conference, he refused to answer any questions relating to the Hutton Inquiry before it had completed its deliberations. “Let the judge do the judging,” he declared.

The Labour government called the Hutton Inquiry as a substitute for a judicial inquiry into its false claims justifying war with Iraq. It hoped that Hutton’s remit would focus attention on the much narrower question of the row with the BBC deliberately engineered by Campbell and others and on Kelly’s tragic death.

Daily testimony and hundreds of internal documents presented in no rational order—and usually referred to by obscure reference codes—have indeed acted as a soporific for most working people rather than clarifying what took place. This process has been made worse by the efforts of the press, whose coverage has rarely drawn attention to the fundamental issues.

But the attempt to throw sand in everyone’s faces appears to be coming unstuck. Both the main opposition parties have already decided that a weakened Blair is vulnerable to attack and have renewed their earlier calls for a judicial inquiry into the war. The testimony of the DIS weapons experts will give fresh impetus to this demand.

This opens up opportunities for the millions of working people in Britain and internationally who were opposed to the Iraq war, but who had no political means of challenging the government other than to take to the streets in protest.

At that time, the various factions of the ruling elite and its parties responded to the mass protests by presenting a common front in

support of the government, with most critics claiming to have been convinced by the intelligence dossiers of the supposed threat to world peace posed by Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Now, however, the disputes within ruling circles are sharpening once again—due in large part to the deteriorating situation in Iraq and the crisis this has created for both Britain and the Bush administration.

This has led to many of those who generally supported Blair’s efforts to ingratiate himself with Washington to question whether he paid too high a price. The Hutton Inquiry correspondent for the BBC’s flagship “Newsnight” said that his sources in the MoD had told him beforehand to make sure he heard Jones’s and Mr. A’s testimony as it would be very important.

(It should be noted that Jones, Mr. A and Kelly himself all supported the decision to go to war, despite efforts to portray Kelly as a man motivated by moral concerns related to the pacifism of his Bahai faith. In reality, they were concerned that the government not present a case so flimsy that it would backfire, providing ammunition to the millions of genuine opponents of the war and undermining their own prestige as an arm of the state’s intelligence network.)

The central question posed before the working class is to develop its own method for intervening in this crisis and prevent it from being confined to a dispute between equally right-wing factions of the ruling elite.

The need for an independent inquiry into how the government dragged Britain into an illegal war is indisputable. But no section of the judiciary, which functions as a defender of the interests of the state and not the people, can be entrusted with such a task.

A campaign must be launched to demand the withdrawal of British and US troops and an end to the colonial occupation of Iraq. Meanwhile, the major parties are busy discussing how many more will be sent.

To oppose this workers must build their own party to challenge the Labour Party, to which they once gave their allegiance, but which now functions as the unalloyed defender of big business at home and abroad.



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