

Britain: Lessons of the Hutton Inquiry

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The Hutton Inquiry into the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly is heading towards a sordid and entirely predictable conclusion.

Anyone who has followed the testimony delivered by top politicians, civil servants and members of the security services will have concluded that the charge levelled against Prime Minister Tony Blair and his government that they lied to the British people in order to drag the country into an illegal war against Iraq has been proved beyond a shadow of a doubt. And even within the narrow remit of the inquiry itself, ample evidence has been presented proving that the September 2002 security dossier was drawn up to provide a justification for a decision to go to war that had already been agreed between Blair and US President George W. Bush; that its contents had indeed been “sexed up” by the government by including claims known to be false such as the assertion that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes; and that when these lies became unsupportable a diversion was mounted focusing on an attack on the BBC and its reporter Andrew Gilligan that was to lead to the death of Dr. Kelly.

Yet these essential questions are being buried beneath a welter of semantic nitpicking, aimed at presenting the case that the most important issue is to establish whether it was Gilligan or Kelly who first used the words “sexed up” and other inconsequential matters. The fact that Gilligan correctly reported the concerns voiced by Kelly and others within the security services over the weakness of the government’s case for war is treated as a minor detail.

Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon may be offered as a fall guy for the government’s crimes, but only in order to defend Blair himself who has not even been called on to answer for the series of lies, half-truths and evasions contained in his testimony to the inquiry.

The Hutton Inquiry was made necessary by growing divisions within the ruling elite in the aftermath of the Iraq war. Most of Blair’s latter-day critics had been at one with him over his strategy of aligning with Washington and going to war in order to strengthen the hand of British imperialism against its major European rivals and also secure a share of Iraq’s oil wealth. But the disastrous results of the invasion exacerbated concerns that Britain was being dragged into a Vietnam-style quagmire, that its misuse of intelligence was discrediting MI6 and that public opposition to the government was reaching such

proportions that it threatened to discredit the entire state apparatus. As a result demands grew for Blair to balance his alliance with Washington with efforts to work more closely with the European powers and the UN to curb America’s unilateralist ambitions.

Repeated attempts to brush these issues to one side failed. Carefully manipulated inquiries by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee had been held without satisfying those calling for a judicial inquiry into the preparations for the Iraq war. So an inquiry into Kelly’s death was seized on as an alternative to such an investigation, because it would hopefully enable the government to minimise the political fallout resulting from its disastrous decision to go to war.

Having been set up, the inquiry has become little more than an arena in which the dissenting factions within the ruling class have fought to decide which of them will determine how best to assert Britain’s military and colonialist ambitions. Once again an initiative that was advanced as a means of ensuring the democratic accountability of the government has proved to be a charade.

The fundamental issue of how the government misled the British people over the threat posed by Iraq’s non-existent weapons of mass destruction has been deliberately buried. When raised during the inquiry, the government has been able to make the impossible demand that documentary evidence be presented proving it deliberately lied rather than acted in good faith on the best intelligence available.

But even as the inquiry was reaching its final days, world events have proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the government did lie and lied big.

This week the UN’s chief weapons inspector Hans Blix admitted that he now believed Iraq had destroyed its chemical and biological weapons programme 10 years ago and compared the US and British governments to witch-hunters. He specifically denounced Britain’s September security dossier as an example of “the culture of spin, of hyping”. That same day Bush himself was forced to admit that there was no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. And earlier this month, Blair’s former cabinet member Michael Meacher presented a detailed case arguing that the events of 9/11 were used by the US as a *casus belli* in order to implement a plan to secure US global hegemony

through seizing control of Middle Eastern oil supplies.

The inquiry has only succeeded in illustrating the gulf that separates the concerns of the mass of working people from the interests of the ruling elite. The poring over thousands of pages of internal documents is not so much “revealing the inner workings of government” as diverting attention away from the fundamental issues. It is as if the inquiry were hermetically sealed from the reality of the Iraq war and its tragic aftermath, in which every day tens, if not hundreds of Iraqis are killed or injured as a result of armed exchanges with the occupation forces.

The broad majority of working people in Britain have already delivered their own verdict on the government and its lies. The Brent East by-election on September 18 exposed the full extent of Labour’s loss of support. The 30 percent swing to the Liberal Democrats was secured because they were the only major party that made a show of opposing the war, whilst 64 percent of the electorate showed their own disgust with the government in this formerly safe Labour seat by not voting at all.

Given the extent of popular hostility to the government and the damage it has sustained over its decision to go to war, its ability to maintain itself in power is without political precedent.

How is one to account for this? Blair is the first prime minister ever to declare his refusal to acknowledge the will of the electorate as a guiding political principle. When two million people took to the streets of London on February 15 in opposition to war with Iraq, he responded by stating that he would be guided by what he believed to be right. Since then he has made repeated speeches, countering opposition to his privatisation of the National Health Service and education, insisting that his government would be even more radical in pushing through its policies. And he has dismissed with contempt those critical of his lies over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction with the claim that they will be found sooner or later.

This indifference to public opinion points to the fundamental character of the New Labour government, which acts as the political representative of an international financial oligarchy—a narrow strata of the super-rich whose sole interest is to add to their already fabulous wealth at the direct expense of the mass of the population.

It is their opinions alone that count with Blair and their continued support for his government is conditional on his readiness to impose unpopular measures on an unwilling population. This is equally true of domestic and foreign policy. In both cases the government earns kudos by its willingness to court unpopularity and take on its opponents. Blair has been conditioned to believe that as long as he does this with sufficient ruthlessness he is assured the backing of big business and its media.

It is this political agenda that accounts for the constant erosion of the democratic rights of the working class. The

government has presided over a social polarisation between rich and poor that is worse than anything that existed under the previous Tory government. Such a level of social inequality cannot be reconciled with any genuine form of democratic accountability of the government. One cannot secure a popular mandate for social policies that lead to the impoverishment of millions and colonial wars that cost billions, and endanger tens of thousands of lives.

Any mechanism through which the popular will once found expression is either deliberately closed off or becomes moribund. All the major parties are gutted of membership, trade union numbers are in constant decline and electoral participation is at a historic low. Government has become increasing authoritarian and reliant upon repressive measures to enforce policies that plunge millions into an ever more precarious existence.

This inevitably creates a highly toxic and explosive political situation. Blair may calculate that he can remain in power so long as his backers are satisfied, but there are political limits to how long a government can continue to rule without significant social support. Those limits are being reached. New Labour is in the grip of a full-scale crisis of political legitimacy, one that is also reflected in the fate of the Bush administration in the US and many of the governments across Europe.

But anger and disgust towards the government is not enough. Far more is at stake than whether Blair is able to continue as prime minister. What has been revealed in the events leading up to the Hutton Inquiry is the full extent of the political disenfranchisement of the working class and the systematic abrogation of its democratic rights. And so long as the political agenda is determined exclusively by the factional warfare raging within the ruling elite, the outcome will be a further shift to the right at the direct expense of working people.

It is imperative that the working class begin to organise itself independently of all the political representatives of big business through the construction of a new and genuinely socialist party. It must take up the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of British and US troops from Iraq and the convening of an independent inquiry into the way the war was prepared as opposed to the sham led by Lord Hutton.



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