

Britain: Another whitewash over Iraq

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The Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) last week published its report on whether the government distorted intelligence material to justify its plans to invade Iraq.

To describe its findings as a whitewash would be uncharitable to previous whitewashes, which at least made some effort to disguise their intent. In the case of the ISC, even the *Financial Times* was moved to comment that the report “is both a grave disappointment and a missed opportunity. It disappoints because it refuses to acknowledge that intelligence claims made to justify the Iraq war have been proved wrong. And it fails to draw the obvious conclusion from its investigation that intelligence offers flimsy justification for waging war—particularly against a ruthless dictatorship.”

The ISC was never expected to find against the government. Of all the inquiries forced upon Prime Minister Tony Blair into his palpably false claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, the ISC was the least troubling for him.

Appointed by the prime minister himself, the select committee of nine parliamentarians responsible for scrutinising the UK’s intelligence services meets in private. Unlike the ongoing inquiry under Lord Hutton into the circumstances surrounding the death of whistleblower Dr David Kelly, following his outing as the source for BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan’s report that the government “sexed up” its September 2002 intelligence dossier on Iraq, all testimony given to the ISC remains under wraps.

Despite apparently taking evidence from the prime minister, other leading government ministers and representatives of the intelligence and defence services, including Kelly himself, none of this evidence is contained in the final report. Instead the ISC presents its conclusions supposedly based upon these hearings.

Even so, the manner in which the ISC dismisses overwhelming evidence that the government exaggerated Iraq’s military capabilities in line with its plans for a pre-emptive attack is striking and confirms once again the utter disregard and contempt of the political elite for democratic rights.

The September 2002 dossier, *Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction—The assessment of the British government*, for example, has been broadly discredited. Published at a time when the US and British governments were attempting to railroad support for war through the United Nations, it included the claim that Iraq was attempting to purchase uranium from Africa to develop its nuclear capability and that it possessed weapons of mass destruction that could be unleashed within 45 minutes against neighbouring countries, and even against British bases stationed in Cyprus.

The uranium claims have subsequently been disproved, with the

International Atomic Energy Agency stating that the documents on which the charge was based were forgeries. More recently, the prime minister of Niger, Hama Hamadou, angrily rejected the British government’s claims that his country was the source of the uranium Iraq was purportedly attempting to purchase, demanding Blair either substantiate the allegations or shut up.

As to Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, no such weapons have ever been found despite exhaustive searches of the country. The ISC report lists the nightmare scenarios presented by the government and its intelligence services in the run up to war, including Saddam Hussein’s determination to use chemical and biological weapons should Iraq be attacked. And it is forced to note, almost in passing, that, “It is a matter of record that no chemical or biological weapons were used.”

But during his evidence to the Hutton Inquiry, John Scarlett, chief of the Joint Intelligence Committee, revealed that the claim that Iraq could deploy its weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes referred only to battlefield munitions rather than weapons that could be regarded as a threat to world peace. And that even this claim was based on just one source, an Iraqi general.

The ISC acts as if it were inhabiting a parallel universe, one in which this information is not already in the public domain. It does not feel obliged to so much as acknowledge the glaring faults in the government’s case and instead proceeds to heap one lie upon another.

The ISC report continues to defend the government’s claims on African uranium. Its summary states, “we judge that Iraq has... sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa, despite having no active civil nuclear programme that could require it” and that it had “sought the supply of significant quantities of uranium from Africa”.

The ISC defends the inclusion of the 45-minute claim, asserting that much intelligence information is derived from single sources and that this has often been provided by “some of the best and most valuable agents”.

Press attention has focused on the ISC statement that the government had been warned by its intelligence services “that any collapse of the Iraqi regime would increase the risk of chemical and biological warfare technology or agents finding their way into the hands of terrorists.”

That Blair disregarded such warnings is important, as it confirms that all the prime minister’s professed concerns to be safeguarding “national security” counted for nothing when measured against his drive to line up behind the US and thus ensure the UK’s stake in the Gulf’s strategic oil and energy resources.

But in the hands of the media, this note of caution has been used

to divert from the fact that Iraq did not possess “chemical and biological warfare technology” for anyone to be able to seize hold of. The report actually admits that the security services did not know what stocks or agents Iraq possessed and whether they would be effective, and it criticises the fact that this lack of knowledge was not “highlighted” in the dossier.

Similarly it acknowledges that the weapons of mass destruction referred to in the dossier were “battlefield weapons... not strategic weapons”, and that no one actually knew what munitions were being referred to in the 45-minute claim, “or their status. Nor did they know from where and to where munitions might be moved”. This “omission” was also reflected in the dossier, it states.

But the ISC defends the inclusion of the 45-minute claim on the spurious grounds that it “added nothing fundamentally new to the UK’s assessment of the Iraqi capability”.

Later it contradicts this assessment, writing that the dossier was intended for “public consumption and not experienced readers of intelligence material,” for whom the 45-minute claim would have made an “arresting detail”.

The prime minister had never claimed Iraq represented a threat to the UK mainland, the ISC continues. It states that the first draft of his foreword to the dossier stated, “The case I make is not that Saddam could launch a nuclear attack on London or another part of the UK (he could not).” It was “unfortunate that this point was removed from the published version”, the ISC state. Unfortunate indeed.

As regards the threat to UK national interests, the ISC find evidence of this in the fact that “UK forces deployed in the region to enforce the Southern and Northern No-fly Zones were threatened by conventional weapons”—i.e., British planes illegally patrolling Iraq’s airspace were fired upon—“and could have been threatened by biological or chemical weapons.”

If Iraq had them, of course. Such ifs, buts and maybes come up repeatedly throughout the dossier. “If” Iraq’s al Hussein missiles had been retained *and* were operational with conventional or chemical and biological warheads, “they could have attacked UK forces in Cyprus or those conducting operations in the region.”

The ISC even defends the February 2003 dossier, *Iraq—its infrastructure of concealment, deception and intimidation*, which turned out to be heavily plagiarised from a 12-year-old PhD thesis. This dossier was “called into question because it include plagiarised material and the intelligence-derived material had not been highlighted or cleared by the intelligence community,” the ISC notes. And it agrees with the assessment of Blair’s Director of Communications Alastair Campbell that making the document public in such a way was a “cock up”.

But it concludes that the prime minister was “correct to describe the document as containing ‘further intelligence... about the infrastructure of concealment... It is the intelligence that they [the agencies] are receiving, and we are passing on to people’.”

The main purpose of the ISC review was not to uncover the truth behind the government’s claims on Iraq, but to cover up for a campaign of misinformation and deceit. This is made apparent by the efforts it makes to reply to some of the more damaging evidence that has come out of the Hutton Inquiry.

Regarding Campbell’s chairing of intelligence meetings, and the

numerous emails he sent suggesting “improvements” to the September 2002 dossier, the ISC finds that Campbell did not chair intelligence meetings at all because these were only “ad hoc” discussions to discuss “presentational issues”!

At all times the ISC insists that John Scarlett had “full editorial control” of the dossier—a claim that has become ever more important as the government has sought to counter allegations that political expediency rather than facts dictated the intelligence agenda.

As to the divisions within the intelligence services over the government’s claims on Iraq’s military capability, highlighted by Dr Kelly’s apparent suicide, the ISC attributed them to people not having access to “further intelligence of a nature so sensitive that it was only released on a very restricted basis.”

Why Dr Kelly, the UK’s leading expert on Iraq’s biological and chemical capabilities who had full security clearance, would be omitted from sharing this information and what this information consisted of the ISC’s report does not explain.

The only note of complaint throughout the committee’s findings is directed at Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, who has been widely touted as the potential fall guy for Blair at the end of the Hutton Inquiry. The fact that Hoon did not inform the ISC that some intelligence officials had expressed concern at the September dossier was “unhelpful and potentially misleading”, it reports.

Apart from this, the ISC proclaims that it is satisfied that no “political pressures” were exerted during the production of the dossier and that it was “not ‘sexed up’ by Alastair Campbell or anyone else”.

An appendix included at the back of the report even criticises the Foreign Affairs Committee, which reported previously on the same issue and also exonerated the government, for going so far as to highlight concerns over the government’s claims.

Responding to the FAC’s conclusion on the February 2003 dossier, for example, that “it is wholly unacceptable for the government to plagiarise work”, the ISC replies sharply that “plagiarism is unacceptable” but “the government has apologised”.

Such is the cynical attitude of this group of parliamentarians to the government’s deceptions.



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