

Britain: Former minister Robin Cook says Blair lied over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction

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Former Cabinet member Robin Cook has stated publicly his firsthand knowledge that Prime Minister Tony Blair knew that Saddam Hussein possessed no weapons of mass destruction—at the very least weeks prior to his decision to launch an illegal war of aggression against Iraq.

In doing so he has confirmed that Blair deliberately lied to the British people about the danger posed by such weapons in order to justify a pact made with President George W. Bush months earlier that he would support a US-led bombardment and invasion of the oil-rich Middle Eastern state.

Cook further confirms that John Scarlett, the head of the Joint Intelligence Committee also knew that no such threat from nuclear, chemical or biological weapons existed. Scarlett was formally in overall charge of drawing up the government's widely discredited September 2002 security dossier which alleged that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes. During the inquiry by Lord Hutton into the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly, the government's main defence against charges that it had "sexed up" the dossier focused on the insistence that Scarlett "owned" the document and that the 45-minute claim was based on MI6 intelligence.

Cook has now effectively branded Scarlett to be as big a liar as Blair, equally aware that Iraq presented no danger to world peace having destroyed whatever WMDs it possessed under the pressure of more than a decade of economic sanctions and intrusive weapons inspections by the United Nations.

The revelations of Blair's former foreign secretary and then leader of the House of Commons, who resigned from Cabinet on March 17, have also served to expose the Hutton Inquiry as a political snowjob.

At no time did Hutton or his counsel, James Dingemans, forcefully challenge Blair and other top government and civil service figures over claims that everyone by now knows were lies. Indeed a large portion of the inquiry was spent placing maximum pressure on BBC *Today* programme reporter Andrew Gilligan to retract his assertion made in a March 29 report that the government inserted the 45-minute claim *knowing it was wrong*.

The inquiry succeeded in doing so and there is every indication that Hutton's report will attempt to make Gilligan the main fall-guy by attributing responsibility for the death of Kelly to his "misreporting."

Such evasions will not hold water when such a high-placed critic of Blair's decision to go to war—who like others such as former International Development secretary Claire Short was never called on to testify—has now stated that Blair did know that the 45-minute claim and many others were false.

Cook's diaries, to be published under the title *Poison*, explain that Blair privately conceded two weeks before the Iraq war that Saddam Hussein did not have any usable weapons of mass destruction. The prime minister "deliberately crafted a suggestive phrasing" to mislead the public into thinking there was a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda, and he did not want UN weapons inspections to be successful. Therefore the government misled the House of Commons and asked MPs to vote for war on a "false prospectus", Cook writes. John Scarlett also "assented" that Iraq had no such weapons of mass destruction.

Cook states that Blair had earlier given President Bill Clinton his assurance that he would support US military action in Iraq if action in the UN failed "and it would certainly have been in line with his previous practice if he had given President Bush a private assurance of British support".

The relevant sections of Cook's diaries are as follows:

On February 20 this year Cook was given a briefing by Scarlett: "My conclusion at the end of an hour is that Saddam probably does not have weapons of mass destruction in the sense of weapons that could be used against large-scale civilian targets."

On March 5, Cook saw Blair: "The most revealing exchange came when we talked about Saddam's arsenal. I told him, 'It's clear from the private briefing I have had that Saddam has no weapons of mass destruction in a sense of weapons that could strike at strategic cities. But he probably does have several thousand battlefield chemical munitions. Do you never worry that he might use them against British troops?'"

Blair replied, "Yes, but all the effort he has had to put into concealment makes it difficult for him to assemble them quickly for use."

From this exchange Cook drew two related conclusions: "The first was that the timetable to war was plainly not driven by the progress of the UN weapons inspections. Tony made no attempt to pretend that what [UN's chief weapons inspector] Hans Blix might report would make any difference to the countdown to invasion.

"The second troubling element to our conversation was that Tony did not try to argue me out of the view that Saddam did not have real weapons of mass destruction that were designed for strategic use against city populations and capable of being delivered with reliability over long distances. I had now expressed that view to both the chairman of the JIC and to the prime minister and both had assented in it.

"At the time I did believe it likely that Saddam had retained a

quantity of chemical munitions for tactical use on the battlefield. These did not pose ‘a real and present danger to Britain’ as they were not designed for use against city populations and by definition could threaten British personnel only if we were to deploy them on the battlefield within range of Iraqi artillery.

“I had now twice been told that even those chemical shells had been put beyond operational use in response to the pressure from intrusive inspections.”

Cook sums up: “I have no reason to doubt that Tony Blair believed in September that Saddam really had weapons of mass destruction ready for firing within 45 minutes. What was clear from this conversation was that he did not believe it himself in March.”

From this knowledge he states his belief, “I am certain the real reason he went to war was that he found it easier to resist the public opinion of Britain than the request of the US President.”

He then raises what he calls, “the gravest of political questions. The rules of the Commons explicitly require ministers to correct the record as soon as they are aware that they may have misled parliament. If the government did come to know that the [United States] State Department did not trust the claims in the September dossier and that some of even their top experts did not believe them, should they not have told parliament before asking the Commons to vote for war on a false prospectus?”

Under any other circumstances it is hard to imagine how Cook’s diaries would not lead to a chorus of demands for Blair’s removal as prime minister. Instead a few dissident Labourites, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have made yet another call for a judicial inquiry—this time into whether Britain did indeed go to war on “a flawed prospectus,” either because of inadequate intelligence or the mishandling of intelligence.

There is no doubt that the case for an independent inquiry into the government’s lies is unarguable. But that need will not be met by yet another judicial cover-up like that so recently presided over by Lord Hutton. And it ignores the basic fact that there is no longer any doubt that there are no weapons of mass destruction and that the British and US governments lied. The demand for an inquiry under these circumstances is an indication of political prostration before the government, rather than a challenge to it.

This is confirmed by the actions of Cook himself. His diaries are the first time that he has accused Blair of deliberately lying. Previously he has distanced himself from those who did such as Short by insisting that the prime minister made honest errors of judgement.

Cook deliberately held off from stating so until after last week’s Labour Party conference because he did not want to make things too difficult for Blair. This was under conditions where the trade union bureaucracy was conspiring with Number 10 to ensure that no debate was held on resolutions opposing the war and occupation of Iraq and calling for Blair’s removal.

The shamefaced character of the political opposition he faces goes a long way towards explaining why Blair has responded with his customary arrogance to the publication of Cook’s diaries. Blair’s spokesman called the charges levelled against the prime minister as “absurd” and former colleagues queued up to rebut Cook’s claim that there was significant disquiet within cabinet over the prospect of war.

Two factors help shape the venal and cowardly character of what might be termed the official opposition to Blair.

The first is that there may be a degree of disquiet over how far Blair was prepared to go in order to secure a political alliance with Washington and a fear that Britain may unduly antagonise its

European partners, but this does not as yet constitute an alternative perspective. The *Sunday Times* own editorial on its exclusive is revealing in this regard. Rupert Murdoch’s flagship comments that Blair, “had always been playing a longer game. Faced with the cabinet rumblings in March 2002, he said, as Mr Cook reveals, ‘I tell you that we must steer close to America. If we don’t we lose our influence to shape what they do.’ That was true then and it remains true now. The prime minister’s achievement has been to keep a potentially isolationist US administration engaged with the rest of the world... The battle to keep America engaged must continue. Mr Blair recognises the necessity of doing so.”

To seriously confront Blair would mean challenging Washington and the financial oligarchy that dictates the policies of both governments in their rapacious drive for colonial conquest, the destruction of welfare programmes and tax breaks for the major corporations. And no one within the camp of disgruntled Labourites, Tories and Liberal Democrats would contemplate such a struggle.

The second overarching political consideration shared by Blair and his critics is their agreement that the great mass of the working class must be ruthlessly excluded from the political process. The politicians of every major party are well aware that the millions who took to the streets to oppose war in February this year have become more angry and alienated from the government and its entire pro-big business agenda in the months since then. On a daily basis every effort is made to ensure that this can find no political expression—whether at the ballot box, in the media, within their parties or the trade unions. Therefore Blair’s critics may want to exert pressure on the government, but not at the expense of igniting a broader movement of social and political opposition around the explosive question of Iraq.

Only the independent political mobilisation of the working class provides a way to challenge the government’s warmongering and right-wing social policies. For this a new and genuinely socialist party must be built that would demand the convening of an independent and democratically accountable inquiry into the way the war was prepared as part of a broader offensive against the colonial occupation of Iraq.



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