

Butler inquiry into Iraq intelligence: Blair prepares another whitewash

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British prime minister Tony Blair has launched another whitewash of his government, only days after the verdict of the Hutton Inquiry into the death of intelligence agent and whistleblower Dr. David Kelly.

Lord Hutton's inquiry met with widespread scorn and contempt for exonerating the government of having deliberately lied when it claimed that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Hutton contended that Blair and the security services had acted in good faith based on the intelligence they had regarding Iraq. The quality of that intelligence and the fact that it had subsequently been disproved was outside his "remit," he said. And so matters would have rested, had it not been for the decision of the Bush administration to convene an investigation into what it claims were its own intelligence failures on Iraq.

Blair could no longer hold to his hard-line stand that Hutton "drew a line" under any debate on the fraudulent basis on which he had pushed for war against Iraq. Until now he had insisted that the world must wait and see whether the US Iraq Survey Group turned up evidence of Iraqi WMDs. But following the resignation of Iraq Survey Group head David Kay and his admission that he did not believe Iraq had possessed WMD stocks, President George W. Bush was forced to concede an inquiry and Blair had to follow suit.

The prime minister has called his own inquiry on the same transparently false pretext as that of Bush—that MI6 and the CIA, two of the most extensive and experienced spy outfits in the world, simply got it wrong on Iraq. They both reject out of hand the only explanation that makes any sense—that the security services either lied or supplied selective information in order to justify a predetermined decision to go to war.

Blair's latest inquiry makes even the one conducted by Lord Hutton seem like a model of openness and democratic accountability. It will conduct its deliberations entirely in secret, only publishing its findings at the end of July—just before the parliamentary recess so as to preclude any serious debate—and without revealing any sensitive intelligence material. No one will have any knowledge of the deliberations of the inquiry or what factual basis there is for any of its findings.

In parliament, Blair insisted that there would be no discussion

on the political basis for the decision to go to war. "We can't end up having an inquiry into whether the war was right or wrong. That is something that we have got to decide. We are the politicians," he said. And there would be no criticism of the government, only of supposed intelligence failures. "The issue of good faith was determined by the Hutton inquiry," he proclaimed.

Its term of reference as officially described are:

- * To investigate coverage available on WMD programmes of countries of concern and on the global trade in WMD, taking into account what is now known about these programmes.

- * As part of this work, to investigate the accuracy of intelligence on Iraqi WMDs up to March 2003, and to examine any discrepancies between the intelligence gathered, evaluated and used by the government before the conflict, and between that intelligence and what has been discovered by the Iraq Survey Group since the end of the conflict.

- * To make recommendations to the prime minister for the future on the gathering, evaluation and use of intelligence on WMDs, in the light of the difficulties of operating in countries of concern.

At least one additional concern is raised here. Given that Iraq was only the head of Bush's "axis of evil" list of possible targets for military aggression, a remit to investigate intelligence on WMD programmes of "countries of concern" and not just Iraq could be a portent of further political crimes on the government's part.

To add the finishing touches to a truly sordid picture, the inquiry will be made up of five politicians and civil service functionaries considered so reliable by the establishment that they all occupy a position on the Queen's privy council.

The position of chairman will be filled by Lord Butler of Brockwell. He is a knight of the garter who has served as private secretary to two prime ministers and as cabinet secretary—the head of the civil service—to five, including Blair himself for a year until he retired in 1998.

He will be joined by Lord Inge, who was chief of the defence staff from 1994 to 1997; Ann Taylor MP, who chairs the Commons intelligence and security committee (ISC); and Michael Mates MP, who chairs the Northern Ireland select committee and is also a member of the ISC.

The ISC's members are hardly likely to embarrass Blair, given that they are up to their own necks in the scandal over official lies regarding WMDs.

David Kelly died on July 17, the day after he was interrogated by the ISC. The report that inquiry produced in September of last year cleared the government of having distorted intelligence material to justify its plans to invade Iraq. It defended the inclusion in the September 2002 intelligence dossier of the claim that Iraq could launch WMDs within 45 minutes, asserting that much intelligence information is derived from single sources and is often provided by "some of the best and most valuable agents." It continued to defend the disproved claim that Iraq had sought to purchase African uranium. And it even defended the February 2003 dossier that from a US student's PHD thesis, that was based on 12 year old information, as containing "further intelligence... about the infrastructure of concealment."

Butler's own record of investigating wrongdoing by government is hardly exemplary—a fact that must only have recommended him even more.

In 1994, Butler, then a mere Sir Robin, repeatedly exonerated the now disgraced former Conservative arms minister, Jonathan Aitken, of charges first made by the *Guardian* that he had accepted bribes from the Saudi royal family. In an initial draft letter responding to an official complaint by *Guardian* editor Peter Preston—which Butler actually showed to Aitken—Sir Robin famously wrote that the dispute "seems to be a matter of his word against yours." He performed much the same service when it came to similar allegations of corruption against Conservative MP Neil Hamilton involving payments by Harrods owner Mohammed Al-Fayed.

More damning still was his open defence of official deceit during the inquiry by Lord Justice Sir Richard Scott into Britain's covert arms sales to Iraq between 1992 and 1995.

The Scott inquiry underlines the duplicity and hypocrisy involved in the official howls of outrage directed against Saddam Hussein leading up to war in 1991 and again last year. The inquiry was convened after the collapse of the trial of three Matrix Churchill businessmen charged with illegal sales of computer-controlled lathes that would enable Iraq to make its own conventional and chemical artillery shells. It was found that the three had acted with the full knowledge of the government of Margaret Thatcher and of the security services. Between 1980 and 1990, Britain had in fact supplied Saddam Hussein with millions of pounds worth of materials involved in the manufacture of chemical and nuclear weapons, as well as conventional military equipment.

Scott summed up the culture of secrecy at Whitehall as exemplified by the attitude, "We know what is good for you. You may not like it, and if you are made aware of it, you might protest, but we know what is best."

The inquiry elicited many revealing statements to this effect, including Ian McDonald of the Ministry of Defence explaining

that "Truth is a very difficult concept." But it was Butler who was the archetypal proponent and defender of official duplicity.

In his testimony in 1996, he attacked the media for undermining "our system of government" by "grossly distorted and prejudicial allegations."

In some instances, he explained, "You have to be selective about the facts.... It does not follow that you mislead people. You just do not give the full information."

"Half a picture can be accurate," he concluded.

Anyone with any lingering illusion as to the real purpose of such official inquiries should recall that no one resigned as a result of Scott's fairly damning report. Moreover, the government has cited as its model for the Butler inquiry the 1982 inquiry by Lord Franks into the Argentine invasion of the Malvinas/Falklands. Franks exonerated the Thatcher government of any failure of diplomacy and intelligence, having led the Galtieri regime to believe it could seize the islands with impunity, and also for not realising in advance that Argentina planned to invade the islands.

The Butler inquiry is such an obvious fraud that the Liberal Democrats concluded that they could not take part in it without being tainted by association with the government. They have condemned the refusal to allow the inquiry to investigate the political judgements made for going to war with Iraq.

In contrast, the avowedly pro-war Conservatives, despite recent feeble attempts to capitalise on Blair's difficulties, have readily endorsed the inquiry. They are seeking to present a united front with Labour to ensure that they too are not threatened by rising anti-war sentiment and public hostility to all those who lied in order to drag Britain into the Iraq conflict.



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