

Britain: Blair caught out once again on WMD 45-minute claim

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Prime Minister Tony Blair has told parliament he was unaware that the claim that Saddam Hussein could launch a chemical and biological attack within 45 minutes referred only to battlefield weapons when he urged MPs to vote for war against Iraq.

Blair was speaking during the February 3 debate held on Lord Hutton's inquiry into the death of Dr. David Kelly. His was an extraordinary assertion, given that the 45-minute claim was the centrepiece of Blair's own foreword to the September 2002 intelligence dossier, and that the dossier had implied Iraqi forces could deploy long-range chemical and biological weapons. Reporting its findings the *Sun* newspaper and the *London Evening Standard* had suggested Iraqi missiles could hit British forces in Cyprus.

The parliamentary motion moved by Blair that was debated on March 18, 2003, committing Britain to war, said in part that the Commons, "recognises that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and *long-range missiles*...pose a threat to international peace and security" (emphasis added).

The conflict between the government and the BBC that ended in Kelly's death also centred on the 45-minute claim, after journalist Andrew Gilligan had reported at the end of March 2003 that there was widespread dissatisfaction within the security services with its inclusion in the September 2002 dossier.

When a Tory MP asked him whether he knew before that debate that the 45-minute claim referred only to battlefield weapons, Blair replied, "No, I have already indicated exactly when it came to my attention. It was not before the debate on 18 March."

It appears that virtually everyone involved with the September 2002 document's publication, other than the prime minister himself, knew the 45-minute claim was meant to refer only to battlefield weapons. MI6 certainly knew. During the Hutton inquiry, the head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, had first acknowledged that the reference to 45 minutes had referred to short-range weapons. John Scarlett, chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, who insisted that he "owned" the document, also said he knew.

And Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon admitted to Hutton that he too was aware of the nature of the 45-minute claim.

Robin Cook, who resigned from the cabinet in opposition to the decision to go to war, challenged the prime minister's profession of ignorance. He asked Hoon to qualify Blair's remarks because they conflicted with a conversation Cook had with the prime minister on March 5—before the debate on war. He told parliament, "I find it difficult to reconcile what I knew and what I am sure the prime minister knew at the time we had the vote."

In his diary, Cook states that he had told Blair that according to his private briefings by the security services it was clear 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." He asked Blair, "Do you never worry that he might use them against British troops?" Blair never contradicted Cook's assessment.

In reply to questions, Hoon admitted that he knew the claim referred to battlefield weapons when the debate on war took place, but could not explain the discrepancy between his understanding and Blair's. Conservative leader Michael Howard was moved to ask, "Is he seriously suggesting [Hoon] had this information but didn't pass it on to the prime minister?"

When interviewed the next day by BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme, Hoon professed to have discovered that the 45-minute claim referred to battlefield weapons at an unspecified time after the September 2002 dossier was published and before the March 18, 2003, vote to go to war. But when asked why he had not informed Blair, he offered the ridiculous defence that the issue was "not at the time a great issue of public concern"!

Hoon made additional gaffes. When asked why he had not corrected the wrong impression in the national press that Britain could have been attacked by Iraqi WMDs within 45-minutes, he replied: "I didn't see those newspapers, so the question of a correction did not arise, as far as I was concerned."

On September 22, 2003, however, Hoon was recalled to appear before the Hutton Inquiry and made clear that he had seen the headlines in question. He admitted that he had done nothing to correct newspaper reports that Iraq could launch WMDs over long distances against British troops, *even though he knew the stories were wrong at the time of publication of the dossier*. He had told the BBC's counsel, Andrew Caldecott QC, "I recognised that journalists occasionally write things that are more dramatic than the material upon which it is based."

Once again, the media has generally concentrated its fire on Hoon, who should clearly be made to answer for his part in dragging Britain to war but is nevertheless the favoured target for those seeking to direct their fire away from Blair himself. The *Daily Mirror*, for example, which made a show of opposing the Iraq war but which has swung back firmly behind the prime minister, suggested politely that Blair should let Hoon go.

To assume that it is Hoon who is at fault is a convenient fiction, given that the 45-minute claim was central to the case made for going to war *by Blair*. Even Robin Cook—whose oppositional stance is decidedly muted—has been forced to point out that it is "hard to credit" that Blair was not told about the "crucial distinction" between battlefield and long-range missiles.

This has not stopped the *Guardian* from acting as Blair's disappointed defender. Going even further than the *Mirror*, the paper claimed that unnamed "[s]ources have told the Guardian that neither Mr. Hoon nor Mr. Blair were told by the intelligence agencies that the 45-minute claim referred only to battlefield weapons."

It was left to Howard to call for Blair's resignation for taking Britain to war without asking "a simple and obvious question." But this was a hollow gesture, given that the Tories are playing a key role in preventing any genuine examination of the propaganda employed to justify the decision to go to war.

Hutton's report has been widely condemned as a whitewash, and the Bush administration has been forced to concede that Iraq probably did not possess any WMD stockpiles. Consequently, Blair has been forced to announce an inquiry under Lord Butler into supposed "intelligence failures" regarding Iraq. The morning the debate on Hutton was held, demonstrators dressed as judges threw whitewash at the gates of Blair's Number 10 Downing Street residence.

Yet the only voices criticising Hutton's verdict during the seven-hour debate came from seven protesters from Oxford who took turns shouting "No more illegal wars," "Murderer," "Liar," "Whitewash," "War criminal" and "We want an independent inquiry, Tony." Blair had even raised a laugh on the floor of the house when he was

interrupted by the protest for the third time and joked, "I somehow feel I am not being entirely persuasive in certain quarters."

Once the public gallery had been closed, Blair could return to crowing over how he had supposedly been vindicated by Hutton without fear of contradiction. Howard had refused to apologise to Blair, but only while insisting he had never called him a liar. And Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy made some criticism of the Butler inquiry for its failure to address the political basis for the decision to go to war; but in general, the prime minister clearly felt that he ruled the roost. Only his own stupidity has opened up fresh difficulties for the government.

But even now, the government feels able to dismiss Howard's call for his resignation and has denounced any focus on different understandings of the 45-minute claim as nitpicking.

Blair can only do so because he knows that the majority of his political opponents are directly implicated in the decision to drag Britain into an illegal war of aggression against Iraq—particularly the Tories, who have not only endorsed Hutton but agreed to take part in the Butler inquiry despite its false remit.

For their part, the Liberal Democrats formally opposed the Iraq war and have refused to endorse the Butler inquiry. But this somewhat feeble protest aside, they too have accepted Hutton's findings exonerating the government and will do nothing that brings them into serious conflict with the dominant sections of the British bourgeoisie represented by Blair. In particular, they cannot afford to unduly antagonise Washington—and it was primarily to secure an alliance with the US that Blair insisted Britain support war with Iraq.

Kennedy rejected Howard's demand for Blair's resignation as a "distraction" and said that he did not doubt the prime minister's "veracity." He put the differences between Hoon and Blair down to "confusion or crossed wires."

The entire political elite has become divorced from and hostile to the express wishes of the electorate they are supposed to represent. Blair thus stands at the apex of what constitutes a vast political conspiracy directed against the democratic rights and social interests of the working class of Britain and the workers and oppressed masses the world over.



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