

Australian investigation into Iraqi WMD

Howard government exonerated despite proof of lies

Linda Tenenbaum
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What stands out about the report tabled in the Australian federal parliament on Monday on the intelligence used by the Howard government to justify participation in the war on Iraq is the staggering contradiction between its contents and conclusions.

Taken as a whole, the evidence compiled by the seven-member Senate committee investigating *The accuracy of intelligence on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction* amounts to a damning exposure of the conduct of the Australian government—along with its British and US counterparts—in waging an unprovoked, aggressive war. While carefully worded, and couched in the mildest possible language, the 147-page dossier makes clear that the Bush and Blair administrations manufactured and manipulated “intelligence” to give the false impression that Iraq had active WMD programs, as well as the capacity to utilise WMD; that all three governments lied to their populations about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein; and that the existence or otherwise of WMD had nothing to do with the real reasons for going to war.

As the report declares: “...the case made by the [Australian] government was that Iraq possessed WMD in large quantities and posed a grave and unacceptable threat to the region and the world, particularly as there was a danger that Iraq's WMD might be passed to terrorist organisations.

“This is not the picture that emerges from an examination of the assessments provided to the committee by Australia's two analytical agencies.”

The report even alludes to the damaging implications of this evidence. “There was an expectation created prior to the war that actual weapons of mass destruction would be found and found in sufficient quantities to pose a clear and present danger requiring immediate pre-emptive action. Such action is only sanctioned under international law where the danger is immediate, so the immediacy of the threat was crucial to the argument. The existence of programs alone does not meet the threshold.”

In other words, although the committee doesn't explicitly say so, since Iraq had no immediate WMD capacity, or even any WMD programs, the US-led war was illegal. Thus, according to the precedents established at the Nuremberg trials after World War II relating to unprovoked and aggressive war, Prime Minister Howard and his ministers, not to speak of the Bush and Blair governments, are guilty of committing war crimes.

But the bipartisan committee, comprising members of both the ruling Coalition and opposition Labor parties goes to extraordinary lengths to draw the opposite conclusion. It politically exonerates Howard and shifts all responsibility for the “failure” of WMD intelligence—i.e., for the fact that there were actually no WMD in Iraq—onto Australia's intelligence agencies. Its major recommendation is another inquiry, to assess the “performance of the intelligence agencies,” which will be held in secret, conducted by an ex-intelligence officer and, since it will report to the National Security Committee of Cabinet, will probably never be made

public. Its purpose is to bury the issue once and for all.

While the parliamentary inquiry's report was finalised more than three months ago—giving the government plenty of time to rehearse its response before the public release—its conclusions mirror the whitewash brought down in January by the Hutton inquiry in Britain.

One of the main thrusts of the report concerns a sudden shift that occurred in September 2002 in the intelligence assessments being provided to the government by the Office of National Assessments (ONA). While the ONA and the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) had similar views until September 12, 2002, their analyses began to diverge after that date. According to chairman and former Coalition minister David Jull, “The committee was aware of a sudden and as yet unexplained change in assessments provided by the ONA between 12 and 13 September, 2002.”

The report documents that from February 2000 until September 12, 2002 both agencies described intelligence on Iraq's WMD as “scarce, patchy and inconclusive”. They assessed Iraq's military capability as “limited” and the country's infrastructure “in decline”. Saddam Hussein's capacity “to use his weapons is low and his willingness to use them is assessed to be defensive.”

The document continues: “In March 2001, ONA reports that ‘the scale of threat from Iraq WMD is less than it was a decade ago’.” On September 6, ONA said Iraq was “highly unlikely to have nuclear weapons”. On September 12, the agency maintained there was “no firm evidence” of any chemical or biological warfare production.

Then, on September 13, ONA was requested by the Department of Foreign Affairs to prepare another assessment, which was subsequently the basis of government speeches. In the words of the report, the new analysis was “drawn upon by ministers in some of their parliamentary and public statements” and “was intended to be the basis of Ministers' speeches.” The first major government statement on Iraq was delivered in both chambers of parliament on 17 September 2002.

From this date on, the skeptical and cautionary language “became much more definitive”. Unlike the DIO, the ONA now declares: “A range of intelligence and public information suggests that Iraq is *highly likely* to have chemical and biological weapons” and “Iraq has *almost certainly* been working to increase its ability to make chemical and biological weapons” (emphasis in original). Moreover, “there is no reason to believe that Saddam Hussein has abandoned his ambition to acquire nuclear weapons.”

Not only does the committee find this shift inexplicable, it concludes that it was not the result of political pressure. Predictably, Prime Minister Howard has seized upon this finding as proof that his repeated claims that Iraq had an “arsenal” of WMD and a “massive program,” rendering war the only means of “disarming” Saddam and averting a “direct, undeniable

and lethal threat to Australia and its people” were simply based on the intelligence he received from the country’s agencies. If it has turned out to be false—something he still refuses to concede—neither he nor his government were to blame.

To explain the ONA’s sudden shift, one only has to turn to the parliamentary committee’s own report.

In his classified submission, the director general of ONA, Kim Jones, “noted” that ONA did not operate in “a complete mental vacuum” and that it was “conscious of policy issues”. He went on, “We see ourselves as servicing ministers’ needs for assessed intelligence.”

What were the “needs” that required “servicing”? As the chronology of events cited in the report’s appendix makes clear, in August 2002 the Bush administration began stepping up its propaganda campaign for war against Iraq. The White House Iraq Group (WHIG) was established to organise and disseminate disinformation about Iraq’s so-called WMD, sourced mainly from the right-wing Iraqi dissidents who had come under Washington’s patronage. Vice President Cheney delivered two major speeches to “make the case for war” and on September 7, Bush and Blair met at Camp David to work out the details.

On September 12, Bush delivered an ultimatum to the United Nations in his address to the UN General Assembly that it either rubberstamp a US invasion of Iraq or become “irrelevant”.

The lies about Iraqi WMD and other disinformation deemed necessary to justify an illegal, aggressive war were funneled to the Australian government, which had already committed itself to the “coalition of the willing,” from the WHIG via US and UK intelligence agencies to the ONA.

Nobody needed to “pressure” the ONA to provide Howard and other ministers with the material they required, because the agency functions as a political adjunct to the government. Unlike the DIO, which serves the Department of Defence, and therefore the needs of the military, the ONA operates under the direction of the prime minister’s office. It has become notorious, for example, for having supplied the Howard government with defamatory lies about asylum seekers in the 2001 election in order to help it win office.

Not surprisingly the speeches made by Howard and other government ministers after September 12 followed the line of Bush and Cheney to the letter.

As the parliamentary report points out “there was a surge of new intelligence on Iraq... from the beginning of September 2002”. According to the report, “there was a 10-fold increase in intelligence reports received by the agencies at that time, most of it untested or uncertain, and 97 percent of it coming from partner agencies.” The ONA and DIO testified that only 22 percent of this new material was designated as “tested”, i.e., the majority came from unreliable sources—primarily Iraqi dissidents who wanted to replace Saddam Hussein with their own regime.

The DIO continued to express reservations about this intelligence from the US, as well as from the UK, and to caution about Iraq’s WMD. The fact that it maintained a degree of skepticism towards the government’s agenda was bound up with deep-going divisions within the ruling class itself over Australian participation in the US-led war. Significant sections of the military hierarchy, as well as leading corporate figures, opposed the war on the grounds that it would compromise Australia’s “national interests” within the Asia-Pacific region and at home.

Despite the wealth of material amassed in the document demonstrating the fraudulent character of the WMD campaign, the parliamentary committee made no mention of the real motivations behind the war. According to the report, the DIO testified: “We made a judgement here in Australia... that the United States was committed to military action against Iraq. We had the view that that was, in a sense, independent of the intelligence assessment.”

Like millions of people around the world who were well aware that the

WMD campaign was full of lies, and who were expressing their opposition in the largest antiwar demonstrations in history, the Australian intelligence agencies knew full well that the decision to go to war had been made for other reasons.

But the committee decided to probe no further, arguing that “the terms of reference precluded consideration of the decision to go to war except insofar as it rested on intelligence assessments.” Once again, the purpose was to provide a whitewash for the Howard government.

The Bush administration unleashed war on Iraq, not to disarm Saddam Hussein or protect the world’s people from WMD, but to seize Iraqi oil and establish US hegemony over the Middle East against its imperialist rivals. Howard decided to extend his unconditional support, despite massive opposition, in order to strengthen the US-Australia alliance and, in this way, try to ensure continued US backing for his own neo-colonial designs within the South Pacific.

Having been cleared of any wrongdoing by the parliamentary inquiry, Howard has insisted, in the wake of the report’s release, that his primary reason for participating in the war was to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Anyone who opposed the war, he declared to parliament, was a supporter of the old regime.

This was not, however, the prime minister’s position last year—because such a policy of “regime change” would have been transparently illegal. Like Bush and Blair, he needed the WMD lies to justify what was an illegal and criminal war.

In light of this, the official response to the parliamentary committee’s report is highly revealing. The press has uniformly supported its findings, deeming them “careful” and “fair.” Its effusive support for another—secret—inquiry into the intelligence agencies simply highlights that the purpose of any further investigation will be to divert attention from the government’s role. The editorial in the “liberal” Melbourne Age newspaper was typical of the media as a whole: “What the review does not need to be over is an inquiry into the politics.”

As for the opposition parties—Labor, Democrat and Greens—not one voice has called for the resignation of Howard and his senior ministers for knowingly deceiving the parliament and the Australian people. No demands have been made for criminal charges to be laid against Bush, Blair and Howard for unleashing an unprovoked aggressive war or for the Australian government to be called to account.

Behind the official reaction lies the abandonment of the previous norms and traditions of parliamentary accountability and bourgeois parliamentary democracy. In Australia, as in the US and Britain, the prosecution of an illegal war, with the full complicity of the entire official establishment, is an expression of a deep-going shift in social relations that has already transcended the old political forms.



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