

Butler Inquiry exonerates Blair government on Iraq war lies

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As expected, the inquiry by Lord Butler into the supposed intelligence failures leading up to Britain's participation in the war against Iraq has failed to hold anyone to account.

Butler only ever alluded to "collective responsibility" for what were relatively minor organisational failings. This means that a government that everyone knows lied systematically about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction has been provided with yet another shield behind which it can conceal its duplicity.

Everyone is apparently responsible, and consequently no one can be held to account, least of all a government that supposedly acted in "good faith" on the available information.

The inquiry went much further in its attempts to whitewash the government and the intelligence services than the findings earlier this month by the bipartisan US Senate Intelligence Committee on "pre-war intelligence estimates on Iraq." It blamed the CIA for intelligence failures that supposedly accounted for Bush's campaign of lies regarding Iraqi WMDs. In contrast, Butler took pains to defend not just the government but the integrity of MI6 and the Joint Intelligence Committee that advised it.

Addressing a press conference, Butler stressed that proving the existence or otherwise of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was not the task of his committee, but was the responsibility of the Iraq Survey Group—which has not reported.

Nor would his report contain any comment on the work of any other security service, in the US or elsewhere. And he stated that the Attorney General's advice on the legality of the war had nothing to do with intelligence and was also outside his remit.

Butler declared that there was no evidence that the motive of the British government in going to war against Iraq "was the security of oil supplies." There was no evidence of intent "on the part of government to mislead." "No single individual is to blame," and there was no evidence to question Prime Minister Tony Blair's own "good faith."

On the security services, Butler's report begins with two chapters, entirely unrelated to Iraq, designed to highlight MI6's "success" stories in Libya and elsewhere. He professed that his inquiry team had great admiration "of the professionalism" of the security services. What failures there had been were only because Iraq was "a very difficult target." There was no overreliance on dissident forces for information. The main problem was the "length of reporting chains," "a scarcity of resources," the use of "untried agents," and a "shortage of experienced case officers" to review the evidence due to budget cuts.

Butler went so far as to insist that John Scarlett, the head of the Joint Intelligence Committee at the time of the Iraq war, should resist any call to not take up his new position as head of MI6.

On the most controversial aspect of the September 2002 security dossier—the claim that Iraq possessed and could launch WMDs within 45 minutes against British targets—Butler said only that this was an "uncharacteristically poor piece of assessment" and an "exception."

This became a central propaganda weapon for the government and the media in urging war against Iraq. But Butler insisted that he had addressed it, not because it had any intrinsic significance, but only because the media had seized on the claim as something "novel" and because it had later assumed notoriety. The main mistake in the September dossier according to him was presentational, in that the limits of the intelligence it was based on were not "made sufficiently clear" by the government.

On the claim in the same dossier that Iraq had sought to obtain nuclear materials from Niger, Butler insisted that this was "well founded." This is despite the repudiation of this claim by the Senate investigation and its widespread discrediting by the revelation that it was based on forged documents. Butler merely insisted that there was other evidence, which he does not reveal.

In future, he hoped that the JIC would not be asked to accept responsibility for pronouncing on such a public and politically sensitive subject.

Immediately after Butler reported, Blair addressed parliament in bellicose style, insisting that he had been vindicated. He told MPs that he accepted mistakes had been made, but "No one lied, no one made up intelligence. No one inserted things into the dossier against the advice of the intelligence services."

He could have prepared his speech at any time in the past six months, in the certain knowledge that Butler and his fellow committee members could be trusted to deliver a favourable report.

The Butler inquiry was set up in February, in the immediate aftermath of the inquiry by Lord Hutton into the death of leading weapons inspector and whistleblower Dr. David Kelly in July 2003.

Hutton's inquiry was meant to draw a line under the scandal surrounding the exposure of government lies justifying the Iraq war—particularly given the failure to find any evidence of Iraqi WMD programmes—and to heal the divisions that had emerged between the government, the civil service and MI6.

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.

Both inquiries were founded on the same spurious contention—that the failure to find Iraqi WMDs simply indicated intelligence failings on the part of MI6 and the CIA. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, “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.”

The Butler inquiry was always intended as a stage-managed affair, with a prescribed remit that Blair insisted meant there would be no “inquiry into whether the war was right or wrong,” and in which the “issue of good faith was determined by the Hutton inquiry.”

Its proceedings were held in secret, and it was presided over by a panel of trusted representatives of the establishment. In 1994, Butler himself cleared disgraced Conservative minister Jonathan Aitken of charges that he had accepted bribes from the Saudi royal family.

During the inquiry by Lord Justice Sir Richard Scott into Britain’s covert arms sales to Iraq between 1992 and 1995, Butler famously declared regarding government lies, “You have to be selective about the facts.... It does not follow that you mislead people. You just do not give the full information.”

The Butler inquiry is the fourth parliamentary investigation to exonerate the Blair government of any wrongdoing in dragging Britain into an illegal war of aggression on the basis of lies.

Like Lord Hutton, the Intelligence and Security Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee before him, Lord Butler has confirmed the non-existence of any mechanism within the official structures of the state through which to hold the government to account. In short, the real failure demonstrated by the Iraq war is that of the democratic process itself.

The Blair government went to war on a pretext it knew to be false and against the wishes of a clear majority of the electorate, almost 2 million of whom demonstrated in London on February 15 in opposition.

Moreover, amongst those ordinary people who backed war, many did so only because they had been lied to.

The government was aided and abetted by the media, which in the vast majority of cases dutifully and unquestioningly regurgitated official propaganda.

In Parliament, the majority of MPs supported the war from the first moment that the possibility was raised. Amongst those who initially opposed war without a United Nations mandate, there were many who diplomatically declared themselves convinced by the spurious information contained in the government’s two Iraq dossiers.

For its part, the Trades Union Congress initially called for a UN mandate, but lined up behind Blair as soon as war began.

Since then, war has given way to occupation and increasingly bloody suppression of the Iraqi people and their right to determine their own fate.

Yet the government has been able to stand against the hostile

response of the overwhelming majority of working people because the entire political establishment and the media have either rallied behind Blair, or at best limited themselves to pathetic calls for him to apologise “for getting it wrong.”

Even amongst the war’s nominal opponents, the new orthodoxy is that it should be accepted as an accomplished fact and that everyone must pull together to make sure that the ongoing occupation of Iraq is successful.

All those who make perfunctory attacks on Blair before Parliament goes into recess will no doubt later proclaim their support for his planned dispatch of an additional 3,000 troops to Iraq. Shrouded as such statements are in claims of concern to preserve Iraq’s fledgling democracy, the real issue at stake is to ensure Britain receives a share of the spoils of Iraq’s oil wealth and that its strategic alliance with Washington is preserved.

All democratic norms have been eviscerated because it is no longer possible to reconcile the rapacious demands of the ruling elite with the old system of checks and balances that Parliament was meant to embody.

The unaccountability of government to the popular will is the obverse side of the coin to its direct accountability to the dictates of a financial oligarchy, intent on despoiling the world and its resources for its personal enrichment.

This process is carried out at the direct expense of the working class in Britain and oppressed masses all over the world.

The political disenfranchisement of the broad mass of the population is therefore the precondition for the ruling elite’s ability to pursue a militarist and colonialist strategy in Iraq and internationally and to slash living standards at home.

The Butler inquiry must serve as a warning that only the active political intervention of the working class can prevent further crimes being carried out by Blair and his coterie that will make even Iraq pale by comparison.



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