

The Flood report on Iraq war intelligence

Another Australian whitewash

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The Flood report into the performance of the Australian intelligence agencies in the lead-up to the Iraq war is another blatant whitewash. By the time the report was released last week, every one of the Howard government's lies about why it participated in the illegal invasion of a sovereign country had disintegrated: Saddam Hussein's regime possessed no "weapons of mass destruction", no nuclear weapons materials and no links to Al Qaeda. Instead of being greeted as "liberators" the US-led force has confronted bitter and determined popular opposition.

But as far as the report is concerned, no one in the Howard government or the intelligence network bears any responsibility for the lies. In the report, Philip Flood, a former intelligence chief, described the material used to support the invasion as "thin, ambiguous and incomplete". It was so thin, in fact, that the formal assessments provided to the government by the Office of National Assessments (ONA) and the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) consisted of only five and a half pages. Flood's report further confirms that no evidence of WMD ever existed.

Nevertheless, Flood reached the absurd conclusion that both the intelligence services and the government had performed admirably. He provided no supporting evidence—he did not quote from a single ONA or DIO report or contribute any new information to that already on the public record. He simply asserted that the ONA and DIO assessments were "reasonable and relatively cautious". This conclusion, he then insisted, was "consistent with and supports the finding that there was no evidence of politicisation" of the agencies by the Howard government.

Flood studiously avoided the most obvious question. If the intelligence material was so poor, what were the real reasons for the rush to war? In the entire 185-page report, the fact that Iraq has the world's second-largest oil reserves is not mentioned. In fact, the word "oil" appears only once, and then in the context of accusing Saddam Hussein's regime of benefitting from its largesse.

Howard has seized upon the findings to declare that his government had been cleared of misleading the public and of applying pressure to the intelligence agencies to produce advice backing the war. "Mr Flood's report is particularly notable for its firm rejection of any suggestion of political interference in the intelligence community... This report is further confirmation that the government in no way whatsoever attempted to mislead the Australian people."

Howard also rejected any talk of reprimanding the intelligence chiefs. "I think we are very well served by our intelligence services," he said. "I think our intelligence services did a very honest and cautious and conscientiousness job (on Iraq)."

On one level, Howard's claims are simply ludicrous. The terms of reference set for Flood expressly precluded any inquiry into the government's manipulation and misuse of the intelligence material. With the full agreement of the Labor Party leaders on the parliamentary committee that recommended the Flood inquiry, it was instructed to investigate the alleged "intelligence failures" involved, not the government's conduct.

Even so, Flood recorded some concern that Howard asked the ONA to publicly vouch for the accuracy of major speeches that he delivered on February 4, 14, 18, March 20 and May 14, 2003, seeking to justify the war. Time and again, Howard told parliament and the public that the ONA and other agencies had proof of Iraq's WMD stockpiles. Flood commented: "It is the inquiry's view that it is not reasonable to expect an intelligence agency to comment on the manner in which the government chooses to use such intelligence."

More fundamentally, as Howard himself blurted out last week, the government's decision to join the invasion was not based on intelligence reports at all. He insisted that his government would make the same decision today to go to war, regardless of what is now known about the lack of any threat posed by Iraq. His primary reason for joining the war, he admitted, was to uphold the American alliance.

As millions of people around the world recognised at the time, the Bush administration conquered Iraq, not to disarm Saddam Hussein, protect the world's people from WMD or deliver "democracy" to the Iraqi masses, but to seize control of Iraq's oil and establish unchallenged US hegemony over the Middle East against its major capitalist rivals. Despite massive popular opposition, Howard calculated that his government had to offer unequivocal support in order to bolster the US alliance and try to ensure continued White House backing for Australia's own neo-colonial operations in the South Pacific, from Timor to Fiji.

Howard's comments confirm what the documentary record, already revealed by the parliamentary committee's report in March, shows: that the government requested intelligence reports to provide a cover for a decision that had been made as early as mid-2002 to participate in the US-led assault.

The committee, headed by former Howard cabinet minister

David Hull, noted a sudden and unexplained shift in the intelligence assessments provided to the government in mid-September 2002. Up until September 12, both the ONA, which is part of the prime minister's department, and its military counterpart, the DIO, were cautious about the US and British claims of Iraqi WMD, describing them as "scarce, patchy and inconclusive".

But from September 13, when the ONA was asked to prepare another assessment—which was to form the basis for government speeches—its language changed dramatically. While the DIO continued to express reservations, the ONA declared it "highly likely" that Iraq had WMD. There is no mystery about the timing of the shift. On September 12, President Bush delivered an ultimatum to the UN General Assembly that it either endorse a US invasion of Iraq or become "irrelevant".

The DIO's continuing scepticism toward the US claims was bound up with deep rifts within ruling circles over the wisdom of participating in the US-led war. Significant elements in the military, political and corporate establishment opposed the invasion, reflecting fears that it could lead to a quagmire in Iraq, destabilise international relations and tie Australian strategic and commercial interests too closely to Washington.

At the same time, the intelligence chiefs were perfectly aware that the decision to go to war had been made for reasons that had nothing to do with the phony claims of weapons stockpiles. The DIO told the Jull committee: "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."

In his report, Flood concludes that the ONA and DIO "failed to judge accurately the extent and nature of Iraq's WMD programmes" and to "rigorously challenge preconceptions or assumptions about the Iraqi regime's intentions". The truth is that both agencies knew that it would be politically impermissible, as well as pointless, to question the war propaganda.

The fraudulent character of Flood's finding of an "intelligence failure" is underscored by the central thrust of his recommendations, which the government immediately adopted. He rewarded the ONA, the agency most complicit in Howard's fabrications, by proposing the doubling of its budget and staffing levels, while calling for the DIO, which cast some doubt on the WMD claims, to be restricted to providing purely military intelligence in the future.

As a result, the ONA's annual budget will rise from \$13 million to \$27.5 million, and its staff numbers will soar from 74 to 145. This is on top of a doubling in the total intelligence budget over the past four years, with more than \$650 million earmarked in 2004-05, and a 44 percent increase in staff levels. By Flood's own estimates, the government has committed more than \$3 billion in additional spending for the security agencies from 2001-02 to 2007-08.

As for the DIO, "the inquiry recommends that DIO cease to produce intelligence not directly serving Defence requirements for strategic-level defence-related analysis... DIO should be more judicious in publishing on political-economic developments, and should do so only to provide context for military strategic

assessments". In other words, there should be no challenge, or even second-guessing, of the reports produced by the ONA, Howard's in-house agency.

Such is the logic of the so-called "war on terror". The more the lies collapse, the more the apparatus for manufacturing them must be strengthened. The line taken by the Flood report resembles that taken by the Hutton report in Britain and the US Senate report in America. Since everyone was apparently mistaken, no one can be held to account. Instead, millions more dollars must be poured into the intelligence networks.

Flood, once the ONA chief himself, and a former head of the Foreign Affairs Department, was well suited for the task of producing such a report in the remarkably short time of four months, just in time for the scheduled federal election.

Despite the obvious contradictions and political character of Flood's conclusions, the mass media, which has either promoted or uncritically fallen in behind the "war on terror" and the Iraq invasion, responded predictably. Its universal conclusion was that the Howard government had been completely exonerated. "With a carefully crafted inquiry, John Howard, like Tony Blair, appears to have dodged the bullet," Mark Forbes wrote in the *Age*.

The *Australian's* editor at large Paul Kelly acknowledged, almost in passing, that the government had decided in early 2002 to join Bush's assault on Iraq, long before the WMD assessments were done. Nonetheless, Kelly concluded: "The Flood report seals the political escape of the Howard government from the charge of fabricating a lie over Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to justify war."

Likewise, the Labor Party, while criticising the paucity of the intelligence assessments that the government used to go to war, agreed with the thrust of Flood's recommendations, including the boosting of the ONA. Not one demand has been heard from Labor or the other opposition parties, the Democrats and Greens, for Howard to resign for deceiving the parliament and the Australian people, or for the prime minister to face war crime charges for participating in a so-called "pre-emptive," that is, unprovoked, invasion of a sovereign country.

This political unity, and the complicity of the media, is a further warning that no significant opposition exists within the official political framework to militarism and colonial-style conquest, and the accompanying assault on basic democratic rights at home.



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