

Former cabinet member Clare Short accuses Blair of lying over Iraq

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Even as the British government was implementing its politically unpopular decision to redeploy Black Watch troops from Basra to Baghdad to free up US marines for an all-out offensive against Fallujah, Prime Minister Tony Blair faces renewed charges of deception over the Iraq war.

Last month the *Independent* newspaper published extracts from former Cabinet Minister Clare Short's book, *An Honourable Deception?*, which was published in full on November 1.

In one extract, published October 23, Short accuses Blair of "deliberately misleading" the country over the case for war against Iraq, and his former Director of Communications, Alastair Campbell of engineering a conflict with the British Broadcasting Corporation over its reports on the war "in order to divert attention" from the government's lies.

Short was in a position to know. The former International Development Secretary was in government in the run-up to the US-led invasion. She resigned in May 2003, claiming that she had been persuaded to back the government's war drive only after receiving assurances from Blair and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw that the United Nations would be given responsibility for setting up any postwar Iraqi administration. Instead, she complained at the time, the US, with Britain as a bit player, had effectively taken control of the country.

Her department's involvement in foreign policy matters meant that she had access to all Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) briefings, Short explains in her book. She was also regularly involved in discussions with senior intelligence officials. But when she requested a full briefing from the SIS on the situation in Iraq, "very unusually, the message came back that they could not do so because No. 10 would not allow it."

Briefings that she was able to receive from senior intelligence figures, and through written intelligence, revealed that whilst they believed Saddam Hussein was "dedicated to the possession of chemical and biological weapons and would acquire nuclear weapons if he could,"

such a possibility was at least five years away, and there was never a suggestion "that something new had happened that created a risk that had to be dealt with urgently."

The claim that Iraq posed an immediate threat was motivated by the government's efforts to provide a pretext for joining the US-led attack, she states. In particular, the notorious assertion made in the September 2002 intelligence briefing that Iraq could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes "was played up strongly in the media—no doubt with Alastair Campbell's guidance."

Short continues, "I conclude that the story later broadcast on the Today programme by Andrew Gilligan (on 29 May 2003, long after Baghdad had fallen) was basically true; and that the constant pressure from No. 10 to strengthen the dossier and the words used by Blair in the Commons suggesting a 'clear and present danger'—that the Butler report questions—do amount to an exaggeration of the intelligence to an extent that the public was misled."

Short comments further on the inquiry by Lord Butler that was commissioned by Blair into the supposed "intelligence failures" that were meant to have wrong-footed the government over Iraq, which reported in July this year.

"The No. 10 line after the Butler report was to constantly repeat that Lord Butler was not questioning the Prime Minister's good faith. Maybe so, but I am afraid it is clear that the Prime Minister did knowingly mislead. My conclusion is that Alastair Campbell launched his attack on Gilligan in order to divert attention away from the question of whether the country had been deceived in the rush to war."

Short's allegations are damning on two counts. First, they confirm that the government did indeed lie in order to drag Britain into a war that was opposed by millions.

Even by the time of the US-led invasion, the Blair government's claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that could be used with immediate and devastating effect had been thoroughly discredited. But it was not only the prime minister's credibility that was on the line.

For months, the press had slavishly parroted the government's case for war, and it had been overwhelmingly backed in Parliament. The ruling elite had supported Blair's strategy of aligning himself with Washington and going to war in order to strengthen British imperialism's geopolitical interests in the oil-rich Middle East.

But as it became clear that occupation forces were facing fierce resistance and popular opposition from the Iraqi people, already existing concerns within ruling circles that Britain was being dragged into a bloody quagmire grew more pronounced, under circumstances in which the government's lies over WMD had discredited the entire state apparatus.

The factional in-fighting led to a series of manipulated inquiries into the justifications given for the Iraq war by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee. But their efforts to whitewash the government failed to quell tensions, which were to explode into the open following a short early-morning radio bulletin.

In his "Today" radio programme on May 29, 2003, BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan had drawn attention to the 45-minute claim and revealed that a senior intelligence figure had informed him of considerable disquiet within the security services over the government's efforts to "sex up" intelligence dossiers in order to bolster its case for war.

Gilligan and the BBC became the focus of a vitriolic government witch-hunt, charging both with lying in order to serve an anti-war bias. In the effort to disprove Gilligan's damning allegations, Britain's leading weapons inspector Dr. David Kelly was "outed" as the source of his information—with the result that Kelly was found dead, apparently as a result of suicide, on July 18, 2003.

In an effort to prevent the conflict within the state apparatus spiralling even further out of control, a judicial inquiry under Lord Hutton was convened in August 2003.

His findings, issued in January 2004, exonerated the government of any responsibility for Kelly's death and cleared Blair of falsifying intelligence to drag the country behind his predetermined goal of war. Irrespective of whether the case for war was correct, Hutton judged, the government and security services had "honestly" believed it to be so.

Gilligan and the BBC were given no such leeway. Hutton concluded that Kelly had not told Gilligan that the government had included the 45-minute claim in its September dossier, "probably" knowing it to be false, as the reporter had said, and that this had been on Campbell's insistence. Moreover, the BBC and its management were "remiss" for not checking Gilligan's story, and its editorial procedures were "defective."

Within hours, BBC Director General Greg Dyke and

Chairman of the Board of Governors Gavyn Davies had been forced to resign, to be followed by Gilligan.

A subsequent inquiry under Lord Butler also cleared the government of any wrongdoing. Crucially for Blair, Butler insisted that, "no single individual is to blame," and there was no evidence to question the prime minister's "own good faith."

Short, however, insists not only that the charges originally made by the BBC and Gilligan were essentially correct but that Blair did "knowingly mislead." In doing so, she has again confirmed that the inquiries were a continuation of a criminal conspiracy aimed at concealing the truth from the British people.

Her allegations have received little coverage by a media that is generally anxious to put past disputes over the war in the past and to support Britain's occupation of Iraq as a means of furthering its strategic interests in the Middle East and internationally. But divisions nevertheless persist.

To some extent emboldened by Short's stance, the former Conservative Deputy Prime Minister Lord Heseltine has subsequently accused Blair of having "lied" over the threat from Iraq. And John Morrison, sacked in the summer as an investigator for the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee after stating on the BBC's "Panorama" programme that intelligence had been used as a "PR tool," has stood by his charge.

Speaking last week to the BBC's "Today" programme, Morrison said he felt compelled to "speak up about misuse of intelligence."

"Threat has a very specific meaning in intelligence," he said, in reference to Blair's claim over Iraqi WMD, "and the prime minister was misusing it."

Such misinformation did not begin with Iraq, Morrison implied. In 1998, at the time of NATO's intervention against Yugoslavia, which was also justified on "humanitarian" grounds—of defending Kosovo Albanians against ethnic cleansing—"I had the feeling at the time that intelligence as being seen as a PR tool," he said.



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