

# Lord Butler belatedly comes out against Blair

Julie Hyland

13 December 2004

Lord Butler of Brockwell, the former head of Britain's civil service, has made an outspoken attack on the Blair government, accusing it of putting too much emphasis on headlines at the expense of reasoned argument.

In an interview with the right-wing pro-Conservative *Spectator* magazine, Butler complains that Prime Minister Tony Blair is even more autocratic than his Tory predecessor Margaret Thatcher. And in the run-up to the US-led attack on Iraq, the government had failed to make clear the thinness of its evidence over the country's alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) because it would have weakened its case for war.

The problem, Butler continues, is that the government relies far too heavily on specially appointed advisers, who give it the answers it wants to hear, rather than "fuddy-duddy civil servants who may produce boringly inconvenient arguments."

Increasingly, there is no effective democratic control over the executive. Cabinet and parliament have been undermined, meaning that "The executive is much too free to bring in a number of extremely bad bills, a huge amount of regulation and to do whatever it likes—and what it likes is what will get best headlines tomorrow. All that is part of bad government in this country."

Government decisions are arrived at "in rather small groups of people who are not necessarily representative of all the groups of interests in government, and there is insufficient opportunity for people to debate dissent and modify," Butler said.

Specially appointed advisers, and quangos (Quasi Autonomous Non Governmental Organisations) such as the Monetary Committee of the Bank of England, are far too involved in the decision making process, Butler goes on, with the result that it is difficult to hold politicians accountable.

Butler's comments have raised eyebrows, not only because they are amongst the bluntest criticisms made

of the government by an insider—he has served as private secretary to two prime ministers and as cabinet secretary—but because earlier this year he had colluded in the very practices he is now attacking, when he produced a whitewash of the government's justifications for going to war against Iraq.

In February 2004 Butler was appointed by Blair to oversee an inquiry into supposed "intelligence failures" leading up to the war. The prime minister had hoped that a previous inquiry under Lord Hutton into the death of whistleblower Dr David Kelly, Britain's leading weapons inspector, had drawn a line under any debate on the fraudulent basis on which he had pushed for war against Iraq.

Instead Hutton's exoneration of the government of having deliberately lied when it claimed Iraq possessed WMD was met with widespread scorn and contempt. And when David Kay, head of the Iraq Survey Group, resigned his post stating that he did not believe Iraq had possessed WMD stocks, Blair was forced to convene another inquiry under Butler.

This inquiry, consisting of five politicians and civil service functionaries, was even more strictly limited than Hutton's. It conducted its investigation in secret and its terms of reference were entirely spurious. British and US claims over Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were not the result of faulty intelligence material, but were manufactured into order to justify Washington and London's predetermined aim of launching a pre-emptive war.

Butler distinguished himself from Hutton only by producing an even more craven apologia for the government's criminal actions. His findings released in July failed to hold anyone to account, declaring that there was no evidence of intent "on the part of government to mislead", that "No single individual" was to blame for any mistakes, and that there was no evidence to question the prime minister's "good faith".

According to the *Telegraph*, “Butler was to be dismayed by the portrayal of his report as a whitewash, believing there to have been adequate ammunition in it for a more potent attack on the Prime Minister.

“The former Cabinet Secretary is also said to have been disappointed by the performance of Michael Howard in the debate following the publication of the Butler report. The Conservative leader was widely seen to have failed to land a punch on Mr. Blair.”

In his interview with the *Spectator* Butler is clearly hoping to remedy this deficiency. But his criticisms, precisely because they are part of an offensive being mounted in the run up to the general election by the Conservatives, scarcely touch on the fundamental issues. Not least because the Tories fully backed the illegal war against Iraq and had almost as much to hide as Blair himself.

Even when it comes to criticizing the government more generally, Butler speaks as the representative of disgruntled sections of the judiciary and civil service mandarins and cannot identify the real nature of the threat to democratic rights under Blair.

The atrophying of the democratic process identified by Butler is not the result of Blair’s leadership style. Rather the prime minister acts as he does because he is the political representative of a fabulously wealthy elite, whose interests are hostile to those of the broad mass of a population that is increasingly impoverished and financially insecure.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained when Butler released his findings, “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.”

The Butler cover-up was part of this same process, confirming as it did that there existed no “mechanisms within the official structures of the state through which to hold the government to account.”

Subsequent reports have only underscored that assessment. According to an earlier report in the

*Telegraph*, the government had, “secured vital changes to the Butler Report before its publication, watering down an explicit criticism of Tony Blair and the way he made the case for war in the House of Commons.”

It goes on, “The changes secured by No 10 diluted the criticism of Mr. Blair and helped Downing Street to mount its main defence—that the report showed that the Prime Minister was acting in good faith.”

The same article also claimed that “on the day he published his report, Lord Butler was preparing publicly to distance himself from Mr. Blair if asked at his only press conference whether the PM should resign.”

It would seem, however, that Butler failed to land his blow also. He never got to give his “deliberately equivocal answer”, the *Telegraph* reported, because nobody asked him the right question!



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**