

Britain: For a war crimes trial over Iraq invasion

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If Prime Minister Gordon Brown's announcement of a new inquiry into the Iraq war was intended to bury questions over the contentious invasion, it has backfired.

Brown announced the fresh investigation earlier this week. It will be the fifth inquiry touching on the Iraq war held since 2003. These include the Hutton inquiry into the circumstances behind the apparent suicide of leading weapons inspector David Kelly and the Butler inquiry into the intelligence used to justify the invasion.

All of these earlier inquiries dealt only with specific questions connected to the war, not with the war itself. And all ended in a whitewash.

The claim is that this inquiry will be different. It will cover the period from 2001 to the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq earlier this year. But Brown stressed that its purpose "will be to identify lessons learned. The committee will not set out to apportion blame or consider issues of civil or criminal liability."

To this end, Brown said the inquiry—to be led by a committee of privy counselors headed by Sir John Chilcot—will take place behind closed doors, with the "most secret of information" withheld from the public on the grounds of "national security." Its findings will not be published until after the general election, due in March 2010.

That Brown has been forced to convene another inquiry is symptomatic of the political crisis engulfing his government. Not only has Labour forfeited popular support, it has also lost the backing of sections of the ruling elite who have run out of patience with its apparent inability to take the kind of decisive actions they believe are necessary.

Having acceded to an inquiry that for years it had opposed, Brown hoped to keep its deliberations under wraps. Almost immediately, however, his plans began to unravel, and he is said to have conceded that some of the

inquiry may have to be public.

Tory leader David Cameron, amongst others, criticized the wholly secretive character of the proposed inquiry, arguing that "some proper public sessions" must be "part of the building of public confidence that is absolutely necessary."

The Conservative Party supported the Iraq invasion. Cameron acknowledged that "the Iraq conflict caused great division." But, he continued, "Things we can all unite over are the professionalism and the bravery of our Armed Forces, the service they gave to our country, and the debt we owe to all of those who lost their lives."

There have been broader complaints about the restricted character of Brown's proposal from others supportive of the war, including over the exclusion of military personnel from the deliberations.

Such criticisms of the government's secretive hearings have nothing to do with genuine democratic accountability. For the powers-that-be, "restoring" the image of the British Army and "learning the lessons" of the Iraq war are essential to their long-term objectives.

The right-wing *Telegraph* agreed with Brown that the "primary purpose of the inquiry must not be to 'apportion blame'." But it editorialised that an examination of "this costly foreign policy intervention" was essential. Most important was to draw the lessons from what it complains was the absence of any "post-war plan," which led to the UK being drawn into an extended occupation.

"With British forces deployed in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future, it is more vital than ever that we learn from the mistakes made in Iraq," it warned.

In the *Guardian*, Jonathan Steele postulated that there were two possible models for an inquiry. One kind, "and what many families of fallen British troops want—would seek to settle accounts by naming all those who took the key decisions, both officials as well as ministers. Another type of inquiry would be aimed at lesson-learning," he

wrote.

Steele continued, “My own view is that an account-settling inquiry is not the best route to follow.... It would give an essentially punitive air to proceedings and lead at best to buck-passing between officials and ministers, and at worst to a media-stimulated search for heads to roll.”

For the *Guardian* commentator, “The wider issue is to ensure that Britain enters no such ‘war of choice’ again.”

In the *Times*, defence editor Michael Evans, expressed hope that the inquiry would examine “at what stage did the Blair Government decide that removing Iraq’s supposed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was no longer the only objective and that regime-change was the real aim?” And what was really “going on behind the scenes” when—in face of opposition from France and Germany—the British government abandoned its attempts to secure a second United Nations resolution supporting an invasion.

“War of choice,” “regime change,” machinations “behind the scenes”? The use of such language points to the real issue—that the invasion and occupation of Iraq constituted acts of aggression, and that for all the talk about Saddam Hussein posing a grave danger to the world, the real practitioner of violence, death and destruction was US imperialism, aided by its British lickspittle.

Claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction served as the pretext for the drive by the US to offset its economic decline relative to its major rivals by utilizing America’s superior military power to violently impose its geo-strategic interests in the oil-rich Middle East.

With the UK hoping for a share in the spoils, the political representatives of the financial oligarchy in the US and Britain hatched a conspiracy against both the oppressed peoples of the Middle East and their own populations.

Evidence already in the public domain shows that Prime Minister Tony Blair signed off in private on US war aims. In public, however, his government doctored and manufactured intelligence reports on Iraq’s supposed WMD.

In the face of widespread condemnation, Blair declared that the test of government was its ability to ignore the popular will. In this, he had the support of virtually the entire political establishment and the media.

Estimates of the number of Iraqi lives lost as a consequence of the war and occupation are as high as 1 million. Iraq has been reduced to rubble, its infrastructure largely destroyed, while millions have been turned into

refugees and millions more face unemployment and grinding poverty. Some 179 British service personnel and 4,315 US troops have been killed.

The cold fact for the British bourgeoisie, and the Labour government in particular, is that even an investigation aimed solely at “lesson learning” in preparation for future wars of conquest immediately opens the door for legal proceedings against the war’s architects.

The prosecution of high-ranking Nazis at the end of the Second World War established that the deliberate commissioning of an aggressive war constituted a criminal violation of international law.

Indeed, this was the first charge leveled against the Nazi leadership. As the International Tribunal convened in Nuremberg explained: “To initiate a war of aggression ... is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

In the case of the Iraq war, this “accumulated evil” has found its malignant expression in mass killings, torture, “extraordinary rendition,” illegal detention and far-reaching attacks on basic democratic rights of the working class.

What is called for is not yet another government-sponsored inquiry into the Iraq war, but the assembling of a war crimes tribunal to prosecute Bush, Blair and their co-conspirators for their murderous actions.

This is not merely a matter of retribution against these individuals. For crimes of this scale to go unpunished would have catastrophic implications for the political, social and moral life of Britain, the United States and indeed the whole world. It would only facilitate new and even more terrible wars of aggression and the atrocities that flow from them.

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