

British inquiry underscores Australian complicity in Iraqi war crimes

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The current British inquiry into the Iraq war, headed by Sir John Chilcot, has heard evidence that provides the basis for war crimes indictments against leading members of the former Bush and Blair governments in the US and Britain.

Under oath, former British government officials and military commanders have testified that from the day Bush took office, it was well known that the new administration was intent on war with Iraq. The September 11, 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington supplied the pretext. Within days, as the invasion of Afghanistan was being prepared, a campaign was launched to fabricate a case linking Iraq to the 9/11 atrocities. The Chilcot Inquiry has been told that in a meeting with Bush at the president's Crawford ranch in April 2002—11 months before the invasion of Iraq—Tony Blair agreed that Britain would take part.

A review of the actions of the Australian Liberal-National Party government of the day, headed by Prime Minister John Howard, demonstrates that it was no less complicit in the plotting and preparation of the unprovoked war of aggression on Iraq. The Howard government's role in the so-called "coalition of the willing" paralleled that of the Blair government.

On September 11, 2001, Howard was in Washington on a state visit. Immediately after the attacks, he declared support for "any action that might be taken" by the US in retaliation. Three days later, Howard's government, supported by the opposition Labor Party, passed a motion in the Australian parliament invoking the ANZUS military alliance with the US for the first time, on the grounds that the criminal actions of Al Qaeda, a terrorist organisation, were equivalent to a state "attack on the United States".

Like Blair, Howard played an indispensable political role for the Bush administration over the following months. On two occasions, he travelled to the US to publicly declare his government's support for Bush's aggressive militarism, which was provoking escalating concern and opposition around the world.

In February 2002, the Australian prime minister was present to endorse Bush's infamous State of the Union speech, in which the US president labelled Iran, North Korea and Iraq as an "axis of evil" on the grounds that the three countries possessed "weapons of mass destruction" (WMDs). Most controversially, Bush declared that the US would act unilaterally against them. The Australian government was one of the few in the world not to express alarm at his bellicose

rhetoric.

In June 2002, Howard returned to the US to declare his support for the Bush doctrine of "pre-emptive strike", which repudiated the entire framework of post-World War II international relations and asserted that the US had the right to attack any country deemed a threat.

The following month, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer stood alongside US Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington and condemned efforts to avert war through diplomatic negotiations. "Trying to appease Iraq," he stated, "will only allow Iraq to continue to build its weapons of mass destruction."

The White House and US media publicised the Australian positions as part of an attempt to convince the American people that Bush's war plans had international support. In fact, several major powers, including France and Germany, were moving to block a unilateral US invasion by offering Iraq a new UN-supervised weapons' inspection regime. Inspectors had been ordered out of Iraq in 1998. By August 2002, the regime of Saddam Hussein had resumed negotiations over conditions for their return.

In response, the Bush and Blair governments launched an offensive to pressure the Security Council into passing a resolution that explicitly sanctioned the use of military force if Iraq failed to prove that it did not harbour WMDs.

On September 7, Bush and Blair met at the US president's ranch in Crawford and, at a subsequent press conference, claimed to have evidence of an Iraqi nuclear program that was underway in defiance of UN resolutions. Howard, who until that point had downplayed the need for UN endorsement of a war, had already shifted, following a phone call from Bush, behind the US and British demand. He told a Liberal Party meeting on September 7 that Australia and the US had a "shared concern" that the UN took action.

Amid a flurry of false accusations against Iraq, many of them disseminated by the *New York Times* and its journalist Judith Miller, Bush delivered an ultimatum to the UN General Assembly on September 12, declaring that the body would be "irrelevant" if it did not endorse military force.

The Howard government continued to play its role as a secondary, but significant cheerleader for war. One day later, on September 13, the Australian Office of National Assessments (ONA), following a

request from Howard's office, prepared an intelligence report that declared it was "highly likely" Iraq was concealing chemical and biological weapons and that there was "no reason to believe" it was not seeking to "acquire nuclear weapons".

Howard used the fabricated ONA report in the Australian parliament on September 17, 2002, to present the doomsday scenario that if Iraq were not "disarmed", its WMDs would pose a "direct, undeniable and lethal threat to Australia and its people". Two years later, in 2004, hearings before an Australian Senate committee revealed that previous ONA reports had made a completely opposed assessment, concluding that there was little or no evidence that Iraq possessed chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, nor was it attempting to manufacture them.

In the face of Bush's ultimatum, the Security Council passed Resolution 1441 on November 8, 2002. The wording, however, did not explicitly sanction war. It only threatened Iraq with unspecified "serious consequences" if it did not submit to a new weapons inspection regime, to which the Iraqi government agreed within days.

The US, Britain and Australia, intent on an invasion, agitated for a second resolution on the grounds that they had evidence that Iraq was concealing WMDs from the UN inspectors. On February 6, 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell made his infamous presentation to the Security Council, using dubious or transparently false images and audio to claim there were hidden weapons.

Powell's speech only confirmed the lack of any credible case against Iraq and dramatically heightened international opposition to the pending invasion. Between February 15 and 17, the largest anti-war demonstrations in history took place around the world. In Australia, as many as one million people joined the protests in cities and towns across the country.

Sir David Manning, British ambassador to the US at the time, has testified to the Chilcot Inquiry that, in the face of global opposition, the Bush administration concluded by early March that a second UN resolution was "not going to run". Blair then decided "the diplomatic track had been exhausted and he would accept the need to take military action".

The Howard government made the same decision. Despite Howard's repeated statements that he had given no undertaking to participate in the war, FA-18 fighters, naval vessels and SAS special forces had already deployed in late 2002 and early 2003 to the Persian Gulf, alongside tens of thousands of American and British personnel.

On February 26, 43 Australian international law experts publicly warned the Howard government that, under the existing UN charter, any participation in the war against Iraq would be a crime against humanity. They specifically noted that the Bush doctrine of "preemptive strike"—which Howard continued to endorse—"contradicts the cardinal principle of the modern international legal order".

The Howard government defied legal opinion just as it defied the opposition of a majority of Australians. In open contempt for democratic procedure, the Australian parliament was adjourned on March 8 and did not reconvene until after Howard and his cabinet had

voted in the early hours of March 20 that Australian troops would take part in the illegal invasion. Evidence later emerged that Australian SAS troops had crossed into Iraq as much as 30 hours before combat operations had even received cabinet approval.

The outcome of the invasion of Iraq has been the devastation of the country and the estimated deaths of up to 1.2 million Iraqis. There were no WMDs or Iraqi links to the September 11 attacks. The purpose of the war was to establish a new US puppet state in the heart of the Middle East, thus allowing American imperialism to control the flow of oil out of Iraq and the entire Persian Gulf.

As for the Howard government, it joined the invasion in order to enhance its economic relations with the United States and, above all, to preserve the US-Australian strategic alliance. For the Australian financial and corporate elite to continue to dominate the South Pacific region and exert its influence in South East Asia, it requires diplomatic and military support from Washington. China's growing assertiveness in the region has only served to heighten Canberra's dependence on the US.

That criminal responsibility for the Australian government's role lies not simply with Howard but has been underscored by the actions of the Rudd Labor government since it came to office in November 2007. Under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, it has seamlessly taken over Howard's foreign policy. Australian military forces continue to participate in the ongoing US occupation of Iraq, while the number of troops taking part in the Afghanistan war has increased to over 1,550. Australian special forces operate as death squads in the province of Uruzgan, assassinating Afghans accused of resisting the US take-over of their country. Last week, Rudd agreed to send additional paramilitary units of the federal police as a sign of his Labor government's support for US president Barack Obama's military "surge" against the Afghan population.



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