

Britain: Iraq inquiry hears the testimony of guilty men

Robert Stevens
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The official British inquiry into the Iraq war, headed by Sir John Chilcot, has taken testimony from Sir Peter Ricketts, a former chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee; William Ehrman, the Foreign Office's director general for defence and intelligence between 2002 and 2004; Sir Christopher Meyer, the UK's ambassador to the US in the run-up to the Iraq invasion; Sir Jeremy Greenstock, the UK's permanent representative to the United Nations from 1998 to 2003; and Sir David Manning, chief foreign policy adviser of then-Prime Minister Tony Blair.

All of them have provided damning evidence of the Blair government's collusion in the planning and waging of an illegal war of aggression by the US administration of President George W. Bush.

One of the pieces of evidence provided by Greenstock and Meyer is the fact that the neo-conservatives in Washington were intent on regime change, utilising the pretext of 9/11. At the meeting between Bush and Blair in Crawford, Texas in April 2002 the final decision to prepare for war was taken.

The top civil servants providing testimony have portrayed themselves as helpless pawns of the Labour government, dragooned into a war they did not support. In his evidence, for example, Greenstock claimed that he had threatened to resign from his post in October 2002 if a second resolution authorising the war was not passed by the United Nations Security Council. He told Chilcot, "I regard our participation in the military action in Iraq in March 2003 as legal, but of questionable legitimacy in that it did not have the democratically observable backing of the great majority of [UN] member states, or even perhaps of the majority of people inside the UK."

This is a re-writing of history. Greenstock was a key figure in the drive to war. Knowing that the war was both illegal and opposed by the majority of the population in Britain and internationally, Blair, on the advice of foreign

policy adviser Sir David Manning and others, urged Bush to seek a cover of legitimacy in the form of a UN resolution. Greenstock participated fully in this political hoax, drafting the November 2002 UN Security Council resolution 1441 which threatened Iraq with "serious consequences" if it did not fulfil various obligations. It stated that Iraq was in material breach of the ceasefire terms laid down by UN Security Council Resolution 687, passed in April 1991 following the first Gulf war.

In December 2002, Greenstock was informed by Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector, that Iraq had complied with UN inspectors and given them access to its alleged nuclear facilities. Greenstock rejected his view, declaring, "One hundred percent cooperation [from Iraq] with inspectors is going to be necessary."

When it became clear that the US had no mandate to obtain a second UN Security Council resolution giving the green light for an invasion of Iraq, it was Greenstock who insisted on the right of the US and Britain to issue a unilateral declaration of war, stating on March 17, 2003 that Washington and London "reserve their right to take their own steps to secure the disarmament of Iraq."

In his testimony, British Ambassador Sir Christopher Meyer revealed that US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice told him as early as September 11, 2001—the day of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington—that Saddam Hussein's regime might have been involved in the attacks.

On March 18, 2002, Meyer wrote to David Manning, recounting his meeting with Paul Wolfowitz, a leading advocate of war in the Bush administration. Meyer said, "On Iraq I opened by sticking very closely to the script that you used the [sic] Condi Rice last week. We backed regime change, but the plan had to be clever and failure was not an option." He added, "I then went through the need to wrong-foot Saddam on the inspectors..."

In his 2005 memoir *DC Confidential*, Meyer writes, "I

was a firm supporter of calling Saddam Hussein to account, if necessary by war.”

Writing in the *Independent*, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown said that in an interview with David Usborne in June 2003, Greenstock “was still asserting that WMD were being moved around, hidden in private homes and buried.” He adds, “Sir Christopher Meyer was no better, though he now presents himself as vaguely heroic. He too was pro-war, always has loved a good war.”

For Meyer, Blair’s biggest crime was not that he waged an illegal war that cost the lives of more than one million Iraqis and laid waste to the country, but that he failed to secure the requisite political payback from the US for doing so. He told the inquiry, “I think, what would [former Prime Minister] Margaret Thatcher have done? I take her name in vain—I may be hit with a thunderbolt—but I think she would have insisted on a clear, coherent diplomatic strategy, and I think she would have demanded the greatest clarity about what the heck happened if and when we remove Saddam.”

Meyer retrospectively chastises Blair for acting in a manner detrimental to the strategic interests of British imperialism. But at the time, he and others now testifying supported war because they believed it was in the interests of the British ruling elite. Blair’s policy of maintaining an alliance with the US at all costs, so as to project Britain’s interests internationally and in a Europe increasingly dominated by the economic and political interests of Germany and France, was a continuation of Thatcher’s strategy.

The self-serving testimony of the former British officials at the Chilcot Inquiry is, in part, an attempt to retroactively distance themselves from the Iraq debacle and to deliver political blows against the Labour government in the run-up to next year’s general election. The fact that they have been prepared to admit so much is in large part thanks to the narrow remit of the Chilcot inquiry, which has no powers of legal redress and is charged only with “learning lessons,” not apportioning blame.

Nevertheless, they are playing with fire. Chilcot’s inquiry was convened as a damage-control exercise by Prime Minister Gordon Brown. But some damage is so great that it cannot be contained. Deep fissures have emerged within Britain’s ruling circles in the aftermath of the Iraq war—divisions that forced Blair to leave office and could yet lead to his being tried for war crimes.

Such demands are being openly voiced by senior establishment figures. Last week, Johan Steyn, a

crossbench peer and former Law Lord, wrote in the *Financial Times* that the Iraq war was “one of the greatest foreign policy disasters in British history, exceeding in the gravity of its consequences the Suez affair.”

He added that he would expect the inquiry to address the “legality of the war” and to conclude “that in the absence of a second UN resolution authorising invasion, it was illegal.”

General Sir Michael Rose, a former commander of Britain’s special services SAS and of United Nations forces in Bosnia, has repeated his call, first made in 2006, for Blair to be tried for war crimes, and extended this demand to others. Writing in the *Daily Mail*, he stated that since regime change was not explicitly cited by the Blair government as the main reason for going to war, “it seems as if Blair misled Parliament and, indeed, the country.”

He added, “... it is not just Blair who should be held to account. In the run-up to the Iraq war, it is clear that MPs failed sufficiently to question the validity of the intelligence used by Blair to justify the war ... if justice is to prevail, and faith in democracy is to be restored in this country, Tony Blair and those officials responsible for the disasters of the Iraq war should appear in a court of law which could lead to them being indicted for war crimes.”

Where should the demand for war crimes charges end? Blair should be tried, as should the leading figures in his cabinet, including then-foreign and defence secretaries Jack Straw and Geoff Hoon. And they should be joined in the dock by Bush and his top leadership.

But Blair’s decision to go to war was backed by the Labour government, the opposition Conservatives and the bulk of the civil service and military top brass, whatever their private reservations may have been. They were not deceived by false intelligence, or by the public reassurances of Blair. Millions of people without access to their level of insider knowledge easily saw through these lies. In contrast, those who have been called to testify before Chilcot helped to concoct and promulgate them. The evidence they have presented is the testimony of guilty men and they too should be treated accordingly.

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