

Tony Blair, war criminal, testifies before inquiry

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Former Prime Minister Tony Blair's testimony before the Chilcot inquiry into the 2003 Iraq war marks him down once more as a war criminal. His testimony made clear that he collaborated in preparing an illegal war of aggression, in line with the policy of pre-emptive war elaborated by the Bush administration in the United States.

Time and again, he directly alluded to his belief that regime change was required in Iraq, even after it was apparent that Saddam Hussein possessed no weapons of mass destruction. His most emotive passage defending his decision to go to war was also the most damning legally.

"This isn't about a lie or a conspiracy or a deceit or a deception," he declared. "It's a decision. And the decision I had to take was, given Saddam's history, given his use of chemical weapons, given the over one million people whose deaths he had caused, given 10 years of breaking UN resolutions, could we take the risk of this man reconstituting his weapons program or is that a risk it is responsible to take?... The decision I took—and frankly would take again—was: if there was any possibility that he could develop weapons of mass destruction, we would stop him. It was my view then and that is my view now."

The substantive issues Blair raises are that there was only a "danger" of Saddam Hussein "reconstituting" a weapons programme, not actually possessing weapons of mass destruction or having used them against Britain or its allies. Instead Blair declares that the "possibility" of Iraq possessing WMDs justified war, given that he had used WMDs in the past against the Kurds and during the Iran War.

When Blair was asked why Britain had not stuck to the "policy of containment" through the use of sanctions, he also echoed the US justification for war that everything had changed after the 9/11 terror attacks. It was no longer possible to "take risks" that other attacks might be mounted. When it was pointed out that Saddam Hussein was not involved in 9/11 or with al-Qaeda, he countered that "rogue states" could not be allowed to develop WMDs and that the link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda was that repressive and failing states become "porous" and therefore easier for terror groups to infiltrate.

Blair essentially asserted that there need not be an actual

threat, only a potential threat, whether in respect to WMDs or terror attacks.

Even while formally denying that the war against Iraq was in pursuit of regime change, and that he had agreed to such a war when meeting with President Bush at his Crawford ranch in the spring of 2002, he repeatedly gave tacit support to the US policy of pre-emptive war. The option of removing Saddam had "always been there", he said. After 9/11, the view was that "we can't go on like this." Asked whether the removal of regimes had become a "valid objective" of government policy by 1999, he said it had not. But he added that President Bill Clinton had come out in favour of regime change as early as 1998. Britain too wanted to deal with the threat from WMDs and if this required regime change, then that was what had to happen. "There is a danger of making a binary distinction between regime change and WMD," he said.

Blair's only attempt to avoid explicitly sanctioning regime change as a policy was to insist that the issue was WMDs and that Iraq it was in defiance of UN Resolution 1441, which he continues to claim gave authority for war to be declared. There were many regimes that he would "like to see the back of," but there has to be a basis of a security threat to the UK, he said. Not once did he identify any such threat to the UK, without which there was no basis for war. Instead there was the claim against all evidence that Saddam "definitely had" WMDs, or alternatively that he had "believed" it was "beyond doubt" that Iraq had WMDs as he had stated in his notorious foreword to the 2002 intelligence dossier.

When it was pointed out that it was proved that Iraq possessed no WMDs and that UN weapons inspectors under Hans Blix had not been allowed to complete their work, Blair again fell back on the question of a "potential": The Iraq Survey Group, he said, found that Saddam had the means and "know how" to restart a weapons programme and this alone justified war. Sometimes it is important not to ask the "March 2003 question" but the "2010 question," he said.

Blair portrays the "2010 question" as being whether the world is "better off without Saddam." It is far more than that. His argument amounts to a rationale for the major powers, and the US and Britain in particular, launching wars of aggression with the aim of regime-change whenever and wherever they see

fit. This was, he said, of continued importance. There are "very similar issues" with Iran as with Iraq under Saddam Hussein, he proclaimed, and Britain was in a "far better placed" to deal with this threat now.

Regarding the issue of UN authorisation and the requirement for a second UN resolution, he baldly insisted that Resolution 1441—passed in 2002—gave war legitimacy. But he was forced to acknowledge that the US was always ready to act unilaterally. He too eventually gave up on a second UN resolution because it was "very clear" that France and Russia would not agree to such a resolution, which had "disintegrated" the possibility of securing a majority on the Security Council. This was an admission that Britain had also acted unilaterally because it could not get what it wanted from the UN, which is in contravention of the UN Charter.

Blair was left to fall back on the fact that he had secured the approval of the Attorney General Lord Goldsmith for war on the basis of 1441, repeatedly dismissing the fact that this was only at the eleventh hour and was against what was put to him as the "consistent and united advice" of the Foreign Office legal team that fresh UN authorisation was required.

Blair's testimony, his kid-gloves treatment by the inquiry and his closing declaration that he had "no regrets" over the war was greeted with cries of "liar" and "murderer" by some of those in attendance. With relatives of some soldiers who died in Iraq present, one woman broke into tears.

His arrogant performance was facilitated by Blair's knowledge that the Chilcot inquiry is not merely toothless, but has every reason to skate over the criminal character of his actions. Many commentators have noted that there was not a single probing question put to Blair by the panel. Not one of his startling and incriminating statements was ever challenged. The discussion on the legality of the war, for example, took just 35 minutes of the six hours of testimony. The inquiry's addressing of last month's televised interview with Fern Britton was typical. Britton had asked, "If you had known then that there were no WMDs, would you still have gone on?" Blair replied that he would still have invaded Iraq and "thought it right to remove" Saddam Hussein and would have only "had to use and deploy different arguments about the nature of the threat."

The inquest allowed Blair to declare without challenge that he had not used the words "regime change" and that "It was in no sense a change of position. The position was that it was the breach of United Nations resolutions on WMD. That was the cause. It was then and it remains."

Nothing else should ever have been expected. The Chilcot inquiry was set up by the government as a means of avoiding any genuine accounting for Britain's participation in the Iraq War. Even as yesterday's proceedings began, the inquiry chair Sir John Chilcot cautioned those in attendance, "This is not a trial." That it most certainly is not. Not only does the inquiry have no legal powers, but it is staffed by trusted representatives of British imperialism, members of the Privy Council, some of

whom have intimate ties to the government.

Chilcot himself sat on the 2004 Butler inquiry into the intelligence used to justify the Iraq war, which refused to hold Blair or anyone else accountable for the "dodgy dossier" culled from old Internet reports or false claims such as the assertion that Iraq had weapons that it could deploy against Britain within 45 minutes. It was a report that allowed Blair to declare in parliament, "No one lied, no one made up intelligence. No one inserted things into the dossier against the advice of the intelligence services."

Sir Lawrence Freedman was a foreign policy adviser to Blair and a staunch advocate of the Iraq war. The historian Sir Martin Gilbert describes himself as a Zionist and his appointment to Chilcot was criticised by four MPs because he compared George W. Bush and Tony Blair to Roosevelt and Churchill in the same year he was appointed to the Privy Council. He recently praised Prime Minister Gordon Brown for being "totally committed to Israel." Sir Roderic Lyne was British ambassador to the Russian Federation and is an adviser to JP Morgan Chase, which operates the Trade Bank of Iraq, and was a special adviser to the oil conglomerate BP.

In addition to facing a toothless inquiry, Blair also knows that he is not the only man with blood on his hands. During his testimony, he noted that Goldsmith supported the war, as well as the cabinet, the Conservatives and parliament as a whole. If he is proclaimed a war criminal, then he will be in company with many other leading figures in Britain and in the Bush administration.

For Blair and his fellow criminals to be brought to justice means placing no confidence in empty charades such as the Chilcot inquiry and in limited protests such as those organised by the Stop the War Coalition. It demands the independent political mobilisation of the working class in Britain, the US and internationally against the warmongers heading the governments of the world's major powers.



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