

Britain: Brown defends Iraq war at Chilcot Inquiry

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British Prime Minister Gordon Brown appeared at the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War on Friday and, as former Prime Minister Tony Blair had done a month before, defended to the hilt the US-led war against Iraq.

The Iraq inquiry was set-up last June with a very limited remit to “learn the lessons” of the invasion—specifically why it was that original plans for a “quick” and easy war failed so abjectly. Witnesses are not required to speak under oath and none of them are cross-examined as they would be in a court of law.

Far from being an independent body the inquiry members, chairman Sir John Chilcot, Sir Lawrence Freedman, Sir Martin Gilbert, Sir Roderic Lyne, and Baroness Usha Prashar were selected by Brown. None have any legal training or experience and they sit without taking legal advice. One of the committee, the historian Gilbert, even supported the invasion and in 2004 effusively praised two of the architects of the war—Blair and then US President George W. Bush.

Brown originally intended that the inquiry’s proceedings would take place in private. Only following a public outcry and criticism in sections of the media was this reversed, although some hearings may still be private.

Brown was called to testify as the chancellor in the Blair government at the time of the invasion. The media has long claimed that he had private misgivings about the war. Press commentary prior to his appearance had centred on to what extent Brown would seek to distance himself from Blair and a war which is increasingly viewed as a foreign policy disaster in ruling circles.

Most of the media have focused on claims by senior former military figures, that as chancellor, Brown had not provided the necessary funds for conducting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Much of these claims are part of an ongoing campaign by the Conservative Party designed to portray Brown as “betraying our boys” on the battlefield. On the day of Brown’s appearance General Lord Guthrie,

the leader of the Armed Forces from 1997 to 2001 told the *Daily Telegraph*, “Not fully funding the Army in the way they had asked ... undoubtedly cost the lives of soldiers. He should be asked why he was so unsympathetic towards defence and so sympathetic to other departments.”

In his testimony Brown went out of his way to dismiss any suggestion that he was not fully supportive of the war. He stated that the invasion of Iraq was “the right decision for the right reasons”. He also praised the previous prime minister and the role he played in the lead up to the war saying, “everything that Mr Blair did during this period, he did properly”.

In a blatant display of hypocrisy Brown denounced Iraq as a “serial violator” of international law. Brown said it was impossible by the time of the invasion to persuade former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein “that he should abide by international law.” He described Iraq at the time as an “aggressor state” that had refused “to obey the laws of the international community.”

Referring to Security Council resolution 1441 of November 2002, he said that Iraq’s supposed hidden “weapons of mass destruction” “had to be disclosed”, and that “this did not happen”. On another occasion Brown stated that the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein “did not disclose, far less dismantle any of his weapons” after resolution 1441 was passed.

All these claims turn reality on its head. The term “aggressor state” is a description not of Iraq but the United States, supported by its UK ally.

By March 2003 Iraq was a defenceless and poor country, devastated by years of economic sanctions. Iraq had no “weapons of mass destruction” and claims to the contrary were lies employed to justify the US leading a war of aggression, in total defiance of international law and the opposition of tens of millions of people in Britain and internationally. More than one million Iraqis, and nearly 4,600 US and UK soldiers, have been killed as a

result.

As with previous Labour government ministers appearing before Chilcot, Brown presented a scenario in which the British government was desperately seeking to avoid war in order to reach a peaceful solution based on a “diplomatic solution”. Brown claimed, “Right up to the last minute, right up to the last weekend, I think many of us were hopeful that the diplomatic route would succeed”.

Such claims were undermined by his responses as to the legality of the war. Brown claimed that legal advice given by then Attorney General Lord Goldsmith had persuaded him the war was legal. Pressed on whether he would have still supported the war had he seen an earlier document from the attorney general questioning the legality of the war, Brown replied in the affirmative.

In confirming that he would have supported an invasion knowing it to be illegal, Brown underscored that the British Labour government was no passive bystander in the build-up to the war in Iraq but bears joint responsibility with the United States for the preparation and instigation of this heinous war crime.

Further confirmation of this was published in a report by the *Independent* three days before Brown gave his evidence. Commenting on a secret Foreign Office document drawn up in 2000 entitled, “Iraq: Future strategy”, the *Independent* said, “An invasion of Iraq was discussed within the Government more than two years before military action was taken—with Foreign Office mandarins warning that an invasion would be illegal, that it would claim ‘considerable casualties’ and could lead to the breakdown of Iraq”. The document was commissioned by Sir William Patey, then head of Middle East policy at the Foreign Office.

It warns of the possible consequences of “regime overthrow”, stating, “Such a policy would command no useful international support. An overt attempt to be successful would require a massive military effort, probably including a land invasion: this would risk considerable casualties and, possibly, extreme last-ditch acts of deterrence or defiance by Saddam.”

Addressing the legality of such action, the document reads, “It would also be illegal. Covert attempts, on the other hand, seem very unlikely to succeed and run the risk of fragmenting Iraq, which runs clearly contrary to our wider interests in the region.”

The *Independent* obtained the report, in a redacted version, from the Foreign Office after an initial request under Freedom of Information Act had been refused. The report said the “Foreign Office eventually agreed to

release a redacted version—with the views of the United States and other countries blacked out—after *The Independent* demanded an internal review”. One of the blacked out sections includes a substantial part of the paragraph dealing with “regime overthrow”.

Crucially, the document is one of those that the Chilcot inquiry has had access to but has refused to make public. Under the terms of the inquiry the Brown government has the power to veto the publication of classified documents. The final say on the publication of any documents is down to the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service Sir Gus O’Donnell. O’Donnell’s close relationship to Brown goes back to 2002, when he was made Permanent Secretary at the Treasury, working alongside the then chancellor.

The compliance of the media in promulgating the Labour government’s presentation of Iraq as a “just war” was no more evident than in its coverage of Brown’s appearance. No other newspaper has even reported the document uncovered by the *Independent*, let alone subjected it to the necessary scrutiny.

Instead the media largely praised Brown for his performance. The only criticisms made were not for his political support of an illegal and criminal war but, yet again, for his alleged responsibility for a lack of funding for the armed forces. The *Times* cited the comments of Admiral Lord Boyce, the chief of the defence staff up to 2003. Boyce told the *Times* that the Ministry of Defence had been “starved of funds”, and “It’s just not the case that the Ministry of Defence was given everything it needed.”

The *Guardian* said in its editorial that “his claim to have been a supportive chancellor to the services is borne out neither by the sums nor by the military’s experience”.



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