

Britain's Chilcot inquiry: A whitewash of war crimes and Iraq war

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The inquiry into the war in Iraq, headed by Chairman Sir John Chilcot, has halted its proceedings until after the expected May 6 British general election.

Its hearings, however, have confirmed that the fundamental purpose for which it was convened was to ensure that those responsible for waging an illegal war of aggression are not held to account. Instead, the inquiry has been utilised to legitimise the invasion of Iraq and affirm the basis on which it was carried out—the US doctrine of pre-emptive war.

The Chilcot inquiry is wholly a creature of the government and has no real independence. It was announced last June by Labour Party Prime Minister Gordon Brown, with the limited remit of establishing the “lessons that can be learned” regarding British involvement in the US-led war.

It was stressed that there would be no assigning of responsibility to any politician, civil servant, diplomat or military figure for their role in the events leading to the war, the military slaughter itself, or its aftermath. Those testifying were also assured that no prosecutions or legal proceedings would arise from their appearances.

Witnesses are not required to speak under oath and none are properly cross-examined. On more than one occasion, including when former Prime Minister Tony Blair appeared, Chilcot reminded everyone, “This is not a trial.”

Along with Blair, all the major British figures involved in the planning and conduct of the war have already appeared, including then-Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, then-Defence Minister Geoff Hoon, Blair's director of communications, Alastair Campbell, former UK Ambassador to the United Nations Jeremy Greenstock, and then-Chancellor Gordon Brown. Not a

single probing or critical question has been asked of any of them.

All of the inquiry's personnel were chosen by Brown from members of the Privy Council, a body appointed by the Queen on the advice of the prime minister.

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 and false claims, such as the assertion that Iraq had weapons that it could deploy against Britain within 45 minutes. Inquiry member Sir Lawrence Freedman was a foreign policy adviser to Blair and a staunch advocate of the Iraq war. The historian Sir Martin Gilbert supported the war. 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. He was also a special adviser to the oil conglomerate BP.

Under the inquiry's terms, the government has the final say on which documents can be made public and even which documents can be handed over to it. The final decision on the publication of any disputed documents will be made by 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. The terms further stipulate that if the Cabinet Office and the inquiry team fail to reach an agreement, “the Inquiry shall not release that information into the public domain”.

An example of what is being concealed was provided when the *Independent* published a Foreign Office internal paper from 2000 that proved that the British government was discussing the invasion of Iraq more than two years earlier than previously stated. The

Independent was able to obtain the document only after a Freedom of Information request was initially rejected, and the newspaper demanded an internal review. The released document was heavily redacted by the Foreign Office.

Even the publication of Chilcot's final report will be approved by the government beforehand. Brown stated in announcing the inquiry that it cannot disclose matters "essential to our national security."

Nor can it publish material deemed "likely" to "cause harm" to "defence interests or international relations." In October, Brown's Cabinet Office issued a further nine protocols imposing restrictions on what is allowed to be disclosed, up to and including the final report, including the barring of material that would impact "commercial and economic interests." The restrictions also allow any government agency or department to veto and remove any sections from the final report that they wish.

These restrictions have enabled many of those called to testify to make a defence of the Iraq war and the policy of pre-emptive war elaborated by the Bush administration in the United States.

Blair's communications director, Alastair Campbell, for example, declared baldly, "I think that Britain as a country should feel incredibly proud" of its part in the Iraq war.

Brown stated that the invasion of Iraq was "the right decision for the right reasons," and that "everything that Mr. Blair did during this period, he did properly." Turning reality on its head, he went on to call Iraq a "serial violator" of international law and an "aggressor state" that had refused "to obey the laws of the international community."

Commenting on the questioning of Brown, *Guardian* columnist Simon Jenkins pointed out: "Nobody asked the obvious rejoinder, that the Iraq invasion was made in defiance of the international community. It ignored UN principles on regime-change and pre-empted the weapons inspecting regime. It was not sanctioned by the UN and was opposed by most of Europe. Small wonder Brown began smiling, a lot."

Blair's own testimony was the most politically revealing. He alluded to his belief that regime-change was required in Iraq, whether or not Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. If there was a "danger" or a "possibility" of Saddam Hussein "reconstituting" a

weapons programme, then war was legitimate—a clear endorsement of the doctrine of pre-emptive war. "There is," he said, "a danger of making a binary distinction between regime-change and WMD."

More significant still, Blair repeatedly drew a comparison between Iraq and the danger supposedly posed by Iran, stating that there were "very similar issues." Because of the precedent set and the action taken against Iraq, Britain was in a "far better place" to deal with Iran now, he claimed.

The utilisation of Chilcot to defend the Iraq war is a warning. For the British ruling elite, far more is involved than mere historical revision or even an attempt by those involved to cover for their crimes.

At the outset of the inquiry, Chilcot stated that it would "help ensure that, if we face similar situations in future, the government of the day is best equipped to respond to those situations in the most effective manner in the best interests of the country."

Such "similar situations" are either underway or in an advanced state of preparation. Events since 2003 have made clear that Iraq was only a bloody episode in a period of escalating militarism that continues today in Afghanistan.

To accept in any way that the Iraq war was wrong, let alone illegal, would be to call into question the essential strategic interests of British imperialism and a foreign policy based upon riding Washington's military coat-tails in Afghanistan, Iran and wherever else aggressive wars will be waged to secure domination of strategic resources such as oil and gas.

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