

Political crisis deepens over delays to UK Iraq War inquiry report

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31 August 2015

The chairman of the inquiry into the 2003 Iraq War, Sir John Chilcot, was forced to make a statement last week to justify a further delay to the publication of his report.

The inquiry was authorised by Gordon Brown's Labour government over six years ago and was expected to last a year, with its findings published in the summer of 2011.

In his statement, Chilcot blamed the delay on the "Maxwellisation" process, which gives those facing criticism the right to reply.

He also criticised the government and civil servants for only recently releasing fresh documents, including records of discussions between former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and then-US President George W. Bush, that now necessitated further investigation. "This has taken a considerable time," he said. "Some documents have been received only this year. The declassification process continues."

Reports suggest Chilcot and his three inquiry members had considered resigning rather than submit to political pressure to publish an incomplete report.

Following his statement, lawyers acting for families of soldiers killed in the conflict announced that they were considering legal action. Matthew Jury of McCue and Partners said, "Sir John has refused the families' legal request to impose an effective timetable ... thereby preventing any deadline being set for publication of the report. In the circumstances, the families' legal team ... will be taking further legal steps as are considered necessary and appropriate."

Rose Gentle, co-founder of Military Families Against the War, whose 19-year-old son was killed in Iraq in 2004, said, "If we get a date, we will know what has happened and we can all move on. They keep coming up with different excuses. It has taken long enough."

The continued suppression of the Chilcot report is a sign of the explosive political fallout that will accompany its publication. Despite the limited remit of the handpicked inquiry, the withholding of vital documents and the wholesale redaction of others, and the assurances given that no one would be held accountable, it has proved impossible to sweep the preparation and instigation of an illegal war of aggression under the carpet.

It was a war concocted on a pack of lies about Iraq's possession of "weapons of mass destruction" that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the catastrophe that has devastated the Middle East.

There has been mounting criticism of the delays over the last month. Former United Nations (UN) weapons inspector Hans Blix, who failed to find the weapons of mass destruction that were the pretext for the war in Iraq, and no doubt wants to cover his own back, declared, "Six years is an extraordinary long time, I sympathise with all those who feel that it has taken too long, and would like to have an honest and competent assessment."

"I would like to see it published sooner than later, the illumination of the Iraq affair is desirable. We all know that in the case of Iraq there was never any authorisation by the UN Security Council. The vast majority of international lawyers consider that the invasion was a breach of the UN Charter," Blix added.

Prime Minister David Cameron has been warned not to seek a parliamentary vote to extend military intervention into Syria, as reports suggest he might do this autumn, until the Chilcot report is published. David Davis, the Conservative MP who has led internal party opposition against military action in Syria, declared, "There's a very practical reason why we need Chilcot soon and that's Syria. We are being told we are to be

asked to support increased military intervention there but how can we judge that request if we don't have the full lessons from Iraq?"

Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond claimed the government was as "frustrated as anybody" by the failure to publish the Chilcot report, but insisted that extending British airstrikes in Iraq to Syria should not be delayed by the inquiry.

The ability of the government to win a vote for action in Syria could be further undermined if, as seems likely, Jeremy Corbyn, an opponent of the Iraq war and chairman of the Stop the War coalition, becomes leader of the Labour Party. Corbyn has also called for Blair to "confess" the agreements he made with Bush in the run-up to the Iraq invasion.

Corbyn declared, "The Chilcot report is going to come out sometime. I hope it comes out soon. I think there are some decisions Tony Blair has got to confess or tell us what actually happened. What happened in Crawford, Texas, in 2002 in his private meetings with George Bush? Why has the Chilcot report still not come out because—apparently there is still debate about the release of information on one side or the other of the Atlantic. At that point Tony Blair and the others that have made the decisions are then going to have to deal with the consequences of it."

Corbyn added, "It was an illegal war. I am confident about that ... Is he [Blair] going to be tried for it? I don't know. Could he be tried for it? Possibly."

It is also clear that if Blair were to be tried others could follow, as evidenced by the "Maxwellisation" warning letters sent prior to publication to several others including Jack Straw, foreign secretary at the time, and Sir Richard Dearlove, then head of MI6, who has been criticised for helping the Blair government to "sex up" the weapons of mass destruction dossier.

It was revealed this week that a further tranche of ministers, intelligence and military officers, and top civil servants, now face criticism by Chilcot—much wider than the original remit involving Blair and his immediate circle. Some are still in office, including the Chief of the Defence Staff of the British Armed Forces, General Sir Nicholas Houghton.

The US has also made it clear that publication of the Chilcot report would harm future security collaboration with Britain. Among the first US State Department documents released by WikiLeaks were cables sent

from the US Embassy in London in 2009 explaining how the British government had "put measures in place" to protect American interests in advance of the inquiry.

In May 2014, Chilcot agreed that only a "small number of extracts" or the "gist" of the documents' contents would be released and none of the published material would reveal what Bush was saying.



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