

UK parliamentary debate buries Iraq War inquiry

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The report by Sir John Chilcot into the 2013 Iraq War begins by stating, “In 2003, for the first time since the Second World War, the United Kingdom took part in an opposed invasion and full-scale occupation of a sovereign State – Iraq.”

But no consequences are intended to flow from this criminal act. The inquiry was given no legal powers by the then Labour government of Gordon Brown who commissioned it seven long years ago.

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted that the report was damning and provided a “devastating confirmation of the illegal character of the war and the criminal role of those officials, both British and American, who organized and led it”—above all, then Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, US President George W. Bush and their inner circles.

On the release of the 2.6 million-word report just 10 days ago, MPs were unable to respond immediately, as they were only given access to it three hours earlier. Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron said that, given its importance, he would make provision for two full days of debate in parliament the following week.

In the event, this week’s parliamentary debate demonstrated that the ruling elite has no intention of allowing the war’s architects to be brought to justice. The vast majority of parliament’s 650 MPs responded with a big “So what?” as they absented themselves from the debate. On the first day, only 40 to 50 MPs bothered to show up, with sometimes as few as 15 to 20 MPs present for day two. In the course of the entire two days only around 50 MPs spoke.

It was not until the end of the second day that front bench members of both parties were even obliged to speak in order to make “wind-up speeches.” Neither newly appointed Tory Prime Minister Theresa May, nor, more significantly, Labour Party leader Jeremy

Corbyn, participated. The media took the same approach. No national newspaper, including the *Guardian*, produced a full report of the two-day debate. With the exceptions of MPs from the Scottish National Party (SNP) and a few others, who made vague calls for Blair to be called to account, the debate consisted largely of MPs defending the actions of the Labour government and the Tory opposition, who backed them in voting for war.

When 81-year-old Labour MP Paul Flynn spoke in the Business of the House session that proceeded day two, he said, “Chilcot has given its verdict. It is a thunderous verdict of guilty not just for one man but for this House, the previous Government, the Opposition and three Select Committees. We are guilty, and are judged guilty, of commanding our valiant troops to fight a vain, avoidable war...”

In response, other Labour MPs present walked out in protest.

During the debate, MPs stressed again and again that the main “lesson” from the Chilcot report was that it should not be used to prevent British troops being sent to war again. Labour MP Margaret Beckett, a Blair government Cabinet member who voted for the Iraq War and consistently voted against any inquiry into the war, complained of how the “public are being given the impression...that the intelligence services and the then Prime Minister knew that there were no weapons of mass destruction and deliberately misled the House. That is not true and was never true.”

Labour MP Hilary Benn is another supporter of the Iraq war who is playing a leading role in the ongoing right-wing coup to remove his party leader, Corbyn. Last December, Benn led 60 Labour MPs, in support of the Conservative government, to vote for bombing in Syria, after they were allowed a free vote to do so by

Corbyn.

Benn warned that the Chilcot report must not be used to prevent Britain going to war in further imperialist adventures. Citing the United Nations Responsibility to Protect, he said, “That principle says that state sovereignty is not absolute and the international community has a responsibility to act in certain circumstances.”

The debate was summed up for Labour by its Shadow Defence Secretary, Corbyn appointee Clive Lewis. Lewis graduated as an infantry officer from the elite Sandhurst Military Academy in 2006, and in 2009 was sent to Afghanistan for three months. With unintended irony, he described the debate as being “in the very highest and noblest traditions of our country... One can tell how good a debate has been when Members find themselves nodding vigorously, no matter from which side of the House the points are being made. I think that that has happened quite a lot over the past two days.”

Lewis was careful to praise the contributions of Beckett and Benn in the debate. He, too, used the occasion to insist that Chilcot’s criticism of the Iraq war must not act as an impediment to the predatory aims of British imperialism. Speaking in praise of a Tory MP who had similar “anxieties,” he stated that a “holistic approach to defence in both soft and hard power” was required and warned, “that the continual budget cuts to the FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] undermine our ability not just to respond to global security threats, but to pre-empt them.”

“I am not a pacifist,” he stressed. All that was required in future was “the highest standard of proof for taking our country to war.”

The Chilcot report has served its purpose for the ruling elite, who always intended it as the basis for finally washing their hands of Iraq and moving on.

This is underscored by the fact that the government is refusing to release confidential advice senior officials gave to Gordon Brown about the remit of Chilcot’s inquiry, explaining why Chilcot was unable to rule on whether the 2003 war was illegal. The advice is being withheld, despite an information tribunal ruling ordering its release. Nevertheless, Chilcot stated that the legal case for UK military action was “far from satisfactory.”

Nothing was heard of the declared plan of Tory MP David Davis, backed by the SNP’s Alex Salmond, to

present a motion to parliament accusing Blair of misleading and being in contempt of parliament. This motion was supposed to have been presented to Parliament’s Speaker, John Bercow, on Thursday. However, Davis made no mention of the motion in his contribution to the debate the previous day.

Even if the motion is presented, it must first be accepted by the Speaker for it to be debated in parliament before the summer recess on July 22.

For his part, Corbyn has refused to call Blair a war criminal or even to expel him from the party. He has said only that he would “probably” support Davis’s motion. If such a motion were debated, most of Corbyn’s party would oppose any attempt to hold Blair to account. Emily Thornberry, Corbyn’s shadow foreign secretary and a “human rights” lawyer, said in the debate that any action against Blair would turn parliament into a “kangaroo court.”



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