

Charge Blair with contempt of Parliament - only then will we know if he lied over Iraq

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From the embers of one war spark the flames of another.

There can be no doubt that the 2003 Iraq war and the insurgency that followed has been an important contributor to the civil war now devastating Syria – a reason, if another was needed, to forensically examine Tony Blair's actions of more than a decade ago. Democratic politics make great demands on a Prime Minister in time of war.

However, there is nothing more corrosive to their reputation than the accusation that they have lied to the House of Commons - as Anthony Eden did over the Suez crisis in 1956. Tony Blair is increasingly believed to have done the same over Iraq.

The former Prime Minister denies it of course - and remains unashamedly active on the political stage. According to reports yesterday he is angling for a Brussels position which would give him a 'pan-European role' campaigning against Euroscepticism, which sounds suspiciously like a disguised bid to become the next President of the European Council.

Sir John Chilcot's Iraq Inquiry was expected to report in 2010. But since then, they have been locked in a dispute with Cabinet Secretary Sir Jeremy Heywood over which Government documents could be released as part of his final report.

Sir John's position has been strong and principled - he wants to publish the critical pre-war correspondence between Tony Blair and George W Bush, including their personal letters.

Last Thursday, a compromise was struck between Sir John and Sir Jeremy which will allow us to see the 'gist' of the messages. We will only be able to judge who truly won this Whitehall power-struggle when the report is published, and we see the extent of the extracts.

So far, the only detail we have been able to glean of their contents has come from the selective quotations used by Blair and his former No.10 Chief of Staff and Press Secretary in their evidence to Chilcot, and in their memoirs.

It seems to run against natural justice that this privileged information can only be disclosed in such a one-sided manner.

If this secretive position continues to hold, I would argue that the public should instead draw their conclusions from one, devastating document which leaked into the public domain prior to the Chilcot Inquiry.

The highly confidential account of a meeting at No.10 on 23 July 2002, held between Blair and his most senior advisers, includes a report from 'C', the then head of MI6 Sir Richard Dearlove, whose report of talks in Washington was recorded in these terms: 'Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.'

Critically, a Civil Service briefing paper prepared for the meeting said that Blair had reached his decision on Saddam when he met President George W Bush in Crawford, Texas, in April 2002 - eleven months before the war broke out.

It said: 'When the prime minister discussed Iraq with President Bush at Crawford in April, he said that the UK would support military action to bring about regime change.'

It was in the same month, July 2002, that Blair sent Bush a letter which is believed - we cannot know for sure because of the ban on its publication - to have begun with Blair promising to support Bush 'whatever' he did over Iraq. The Iraq Inquiry has rightly focused its attention on Tony Blair's foreword to the infamous September dossier of 2002 on Iraq's supposed stockpiles of WMD.

Blair wrote: 'What I believe the assessed intelligence has established beyond doubt is that Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological weapons, that he continues in his efforts to develop nuclear weapons, and that he has been able to extend the range of his ballistic missile programme.' He went on: 'I also believe that, as stated in the document, Saddam will now do his utmost to try to conceal his weapons from UN inspectors.'

The picture presented to me by the JIC in recent months has become more not less worrying. It is clear that, despite sanctions, the policy of containment has not worked sufficiently well to prevent Saddam from developing these weapons.'

Blair added: 'I am in no doubt that the threat is serious and current, that he has made progress on WMD, and that he has to be stopped.'

I believe that the House of Commons should form a judgement as to whether this statement is a lie - and therefore a contempt of Parliament.

In 2010, Sir Roderic Lyne, a member of the Inquiry, asked during an evidence session with Major General Michael Laurie - who played a key role in gathering intelligence about Iraq in the run-up to the war - whether Blair's foreword was 'a justifiable encapsulation?'

The Major General replied: 'No, because I don't believe it was beyond doubt.'

And tellingly, Lord Butler, who was Cabinet Secretary when Blair entered No.10, and who chaired a report into the intelligence gathering, has told the House of Lords: 'Here was the rub: Neither the United Kingdom nor the United States had the intelligence that proved conclusively that Iraq had those weapons.'

'The Prime Minister was disingenuous about that. The United Kingdom intelligence community told him on 23rd August 2002 that we 'know little about Iraq's chemical and biological weapons work since late 1988'. The Prime Minister did not tell us that. Indeed, he told Parliament only just over a month later that the picture painted by our intelligence services was 'extensive, detailed and authoritative'. Those words could simply not have been justified by the material that the intelligence community provided to him.' The use of the word disingenuous by a former Cabinet Secretary is a very serious allegation - just short of calling the Prime Minister a liar - and it goes as close as conventions allow in the House of Lords.

Despite my urging, Sir John Chilcot failed to call Lord Butler before the committee to explain this position.

So how can the House of Commons best respond to the public's disillusionment when the Iraq enquiry reports?

I believe the Liaison Committee, formed of the chairmen of the select committees, should consider charging Tony Blair with contempt of Parliament. This could be done by putting forward an all-party resolution for debate in the

House of Commons, a few weeks after the report is published.
Then - and only then - might we be able to draw a line under this inglorious period in our modern political history.