

SPEECH BY THE RT HON LORD OWEN IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS  
DEBATE ON THE IRAQ INQUIRY, 12 JULY 2016

My Lords, I deeply regret my own decision to support the invasion of Iraq in 2003. When I look at Iraq today, the spillover into Syria and the emergence of Daesh, I believe that it is incumbent on us not just to praise the Chilcot report, but to apply the same forensic examination to what we are to do about it that it gave to providing us with the facts.

I say immediately that the decision of the young leader of the Liberal Democrats, Charles Kennedy, to oppose the war was an outstanding example of political integrity and courage. The judgment of Robin Cook, when he exercised his right to look at the actual intelligence reports and came out against the war, was also a vindication of his intelligence and his integrity. I would furthermore say that the left and the pacifists, which are essential elements in our political society and have often got wars wrong, got this war correct—and all credit to the present leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, for doing so. I have one measure of pride in all this: that my own daughter and son-in-law marched on the protest.

There is one positive element, which came out from the speech of the noble Baroness, Lady Neville-Jones. Having chaired the JIC extremely skilfully and with a deep knowledge for many years, few are better equipped than her to draw attention to what must be done. That is the National Security Council, which has been established and which the Minister spoke about. I hope that he might deal with this question a little in his closing speech: how can we entrench that mechanism whereby Prime Ministers and politicians have to be involved in direct dialogue with senior defence chiefs, and in a disciplined framework with papers presented to the National Security Council in advance, assessed accurately and concrete, detailed and specific notes taken? None of this was done during the Iraq war, which was exceptional. It was done in the first Gulf War and even in the Suez crisis, when the Cabinet was told about collusion even though the House of Commons was lied to. It was a terrible mistake not to have a serious examination in Parliament of what had gone wrong in Suez; let us not make the same mistake again.

In some parts of this debate, it somehow seems that this is all over. Chilcot made very few actual judgments but presided with great skill over the facts. Here I must say something direct to the noble Lord, Lord Butler of Brockwell, whose speech today we listened to with attention, as always. Not only was he the chairman of the first report on intelligence but, on 22 February 2007, he made a very powerful speech in this House. Listening to it at the time, he made me feel that he too had learned some lessons from his own report. He said:

“But 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 23 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”.—[Official Report, 22/2/07; col. 1231.]

I agreed with the noble Lord’s statement when he made it in 2007 and it is a pity that it was not reiterated today.

Let us now go to the question of what to do. It would have been much easier if the former Prime Minister had made an open confession that he had made many mistakes. Unfortunately, on the day of the report, having no doubt had access to it for some time, he produced a written statement of defiance. That defiance—the only word to describe it— cannot be left unchallenged. He said:

“If I was back in the same place with the same information, I would take the same decision”.

If that is left to stand unchallenged, Chilcot will have failed. Let us be quite clear: that statement is unacceptable and it is no honest reading of the Chilcot report. Some people say that there should be no scapegoating. No, there should not, but it is the duty of Parliament, and particularly the House of Commons, to examine this report and make judgments.

The Times editorial “Catalogue of Failure” on 7 July charges that we went to war,

“on the basis of intelligence on weapons of mass destruction that remained privy to the prime minister and his closest aides but which he insisted, in private as well as public, was incontrovertible”.

I may say that he did so in private to me, on privy counsellor terms, on 24 July 2002. The editorial goes on to say:

“It was anything but. Still defiant 13 years on, Mr Blair insisted in a written statement that the Chilcot report alleged ‘no falsification or improper use of intelligence’. In fact the report states that the intelligence ‘was not challenged and should have been’. Many will conclude that amounts to improper use”.

I am one who believes that it implies improper use. The question is: what to do?

It is arguable that the statement which the Prime Minister made on 28 July 2002 that he would support President Bush “whatever” is almost an impeachable offence. Certainly, Lord Sanderson made it perfectly clear, in describing what impeachment meant in February 1906—when he was dealing with the question of the military conversations in that year in which the French and British staff forces got together to plan a British expeditionary force, but did not tell the Cabinet for five years—that the terms of an impeachable offence would be,

“to go to war in certain circumstances, and were not to mention this pledge to Parliament, and if at the expiration of some months the country suddenly found itself pledged to war in consequence of this assurance, the case would be one which would justify impeachment”.

I do not believe that impeachment is the right solution to our present problems. I make it quite clear that I do not think you can do that in the 21st century.

We now have a body of civil law to represent a civil society. It is for the courts to decide on that for the families of the soldiers who tragically lost their lives, or those suffering appalling injuries, much of which we still do not really know about. There is the question of bringing Parliament into disrepute. That is why in another place they are perfectly right and proper to examine whether this represents contempt of Parliament; otherwise, what do we do? Do we just leave it? How many people ever knew, years on from the Suez crisis, that we had colluded with the Israelis and the French to occupy the Suez Canal? It is absolutely essential that this much is learned, because I am one who believes that we may have to intervene in the future. I do not want what happened in the aftermath of this war to condemn all military interventions in the future. Let us be courageous enough to face the need to examine this issue in Parliament, in another place if not in this place.