

LORD DAVID OWEN SPEAKING AT THE 'HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN' FESTIVAL, HAY ON WYE, FRIDAY 24 MAY 2013 AT PHILOSOPHY SESSION ON 'ERROR, LIES AND ADVENTURE'

Ten years after the start of the Iraq war we are still waiting for the Iraq Inquiry report chaired by Sir John Chilcot. Almost beyond belief the Inquiry is being prevented from revealing extracts that they believe relevant from exchanges between President Bush and Prime Minister Blair. They are a specially appointed group of Privy Councillors made for the purpose by Prime Minister Gordon Brown. They were chosen after discussion with Peter Mandelson and Tony Blair.

By whom is the Inquiry being prevented from printing those extracts? We are told by the Cabinet Secretary! That is like a rerun of 'Yes, Prime Minister'. The difference is this Inquiry should be no joke. It is an Inquiry to learn lessons and get at the truth of what really happened in the conduct of the Iraq war. Publication of the Bush extracts would not be blocked if Tony Blair had not objected, nor if that objection had not been supported by the present Prime Minister, David Cameron. Both men are hiding behind conventions that are totally inappropriate given the nature of the Inquiry. Tony Blair and his close associates, in their books, have already selectively referred to Presidential conversations and communications. Who authorised or acquiesced in those? The Cabinet Secretary? There is no attempt to keep to a 20 years rule of disclosure. The conventions and Freedom of Information Act covering such such conversations were never intended to be used to block a major Inquiry held into a political and military fiasco of a dimension we have not seen since the Dardenelles in the First World War. The Dardenelles Inquiry was set up during the First World War to challenge politicians and the top military brass over their decisions. Amongst those criticised were Winston Churchill as First Sea Lord. Over the Suez debacle there was no Inquiry, in large part because soon after it all went so disastrously wrong the Prime Minister Anthony Eden resigned.

First we had Lord Butler, a former Cabinet Secretary appointed Chairman, by Tony Blair, of a 2004 Review on Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. Somewhat oddly, when Butler had finished, we were briefed at the time, that he had expected journalists at its publication press conference to ask him the question he most feared answering: “whether Tony Blair should have resigned?” What an admission that because they did not ask he could not at that Press Conference have said what he actually thought. Two years later, almost as if he wanted to strengthen the Report that bears his name, Butler rose in the House of Lords on 22 February 2007. I was in the Chamber and to my surprise, given his previous stance, he accused the Prime Minister, still Tony Blair, of being ‘disingenuous’. He chose that word deliberately, since I watched him carefully reading from notes. He claimed it was ‘disingenuous’ because intelligence reporting had told the Prime Minister on 23 August 2002 that “we know little about Iraq’s chemical and biological weapons work since late 1998”. Butler went on, “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’. These words could simply not have been justified by the material that the intelligence community provided to him.”

On Monday, 18 March 2013 in a BBC *Panorama* programme Lord Butler said that after his Report was published, he discovered a previously overlooked report that an MI6 officer had had a meeting in Jordan with one of Iraq’s senior intelligence officers who was told there were no active WMD left in Iraq. Butler blithely admitted “this was something which I think our Review did miss. But when we asked about it we were told that it wasn’t a very significant fact, because SIS discounted it as something designed by Saddam to mislead.” Also the Review never knew that the CIA had recruited as a source Iraq’s Foreign Minister. “If SIS were aware of it, we should have been informed” said Lord Butler. Are we going to find out some years after Chilcot reports that they too were deprived of key information? In relation to the infamous 45 minute warning, Butler said that “this misunderstanding was due to a sloppy bit of use of intelligence”. Then he was asked if Blair was a liar. “No”, he said, Tony Blair had “misled himself”! A revealing new definition from a man who had used the

word 'disingenuous' in the House of Lords. Is this new definition to be called a hubristic lie?

The *Panorama* programme left me with a deep apprehension about an ongoing Whitehall whitewash over Iraq led from No 10. At least the Chilcot Inquiry is not, as yet, implicated in such a whitewash and has been robust over Presidential messages. Meanwhile, No 10 reveals that they are in constant contact on many issues with Tony Blair and Blair's own people confirm this. Not for nothing does Cameron see himself still as the 'heir to Blair'. It is hard to escape the conclusion that No 10 hopes to incorporate and win the neutrality or possibly tacit support of Blair by the General Election. Nor is Blair above encouraging that impression by his coded criticisms in return.

Reading the Inquiry evidence both Chilcot and Sir Roderic Lyne, the most persistent questioner on the Inquiry Panel, have focused on the veracity of the words Blair wrote in the Foreword to the Dossier presented before the crucial debate in Parliament, namely, "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." This is not Blair's views; he is claiming it is the view of the "assessed intelligence".

When Major General Michael Laurie, head of intelligence collection for Defence Intelligence (DIS) was asked by Lyne about Blair's words: "Now, was that a justifiable encapsulation?", he answered "No, because I don't believe it was beyond doubt."

Clarifying whether Parliament was lied to will be a test of nerve for the Chilcot Report. It will not be sufficient to duck out and let its readers determine who, if any one, lied. The Inquiry is obliged to find the correct words, not use a House of Lords euphemism like 'disingenuous' or as Churchill once described a lie, in the House of Commons a "terminological inexactitude". What the members of the Inquiry must do is to assess the Prime Minister's actual words

against the “assessed intelligence”. To avoid that issue would be a whitewash.

We all recognise there are different types of lies. White lies. Grey lies. Sexual lies. Necessary lies. For example, a Chancellor of the Exchequer denying to the House of Commons that they were about to devalue, is acceptable. During war, no Defence Minister is expected by the House to say anything that will endanger the lives of those fighting.

Yet there are black lies, lies that debauch the standards of public life and they must be treated with the utmost seriousness. Public disillusionment is such now about politics that many believe politics is the art of lying. If lies are allowed to become the currency of political debate on the floor of the House of Commons then our democracy is gravely endangered. Truth is built on facts. Distort factual reporting is to lie whatever you believe yourself.

Lying to Parliament is very serious because like contempt of court, it is a contempt of Parliament. That has always been considered a very serious offence. When Sir Anthony Eden lied on the floor of the House of Commons on 20 December 1956, two months after the Suez invasion was over, saying “there was not foreknowledge that Israel would attack Egypt” members of the House of Commons knew he would have to go before Parliament reassembled. He resigned on 10 January 1957 and while claiming health reasons, which in fairness was a part explanation for his mental state, it was not why he had to resign. He had to resign because of lying to and contempt of the House of Commons.

On 5 June 1963 John Profumo, Secretary of State for War, resigned, not because of his sexual affair with Christine Keeler but for lying about it on the floor of the House of Commons.

I have written a book explaining that Blair’s conduct before and during the War is explained in part because he had acquired Hubris Syndrome but that is not a justification; hubristic lying is still lying. There is evidence of corporate

hubris in No 10 with them referring in the run up to the invasion of a “Baghdad bounce” expecting a boost in the polls following the invasion which would, they expected, trigger a successful campaign to vote “yes” in a referendum on the euro.

The Inquiry may well judge Blair did not act illegally over the war, which is the view I have hitherto taken, but if they judged he lied to Parliament, then Parliament and the people should be told.

A few years ago I was checking Lord Acton’s famous dictum in the House of Lords Library. “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” A man standing beside me, hearing me ask for the reference, remarked that the really key passage was not this one but a plea to judge those who hold power by a higher standard to those who do not: “I cannot accept your canon that we judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption it is the other way against the holders of power.” I asked him how he knew that historical writing so well, “I am Lord Acton”, he said. Sadly he died in 2010, the 4th Baron Acton, but what he demonstrated is that the lessons about truth and power are not new, but are handed down through the centuries. We ignore them at our peril and respect them with honour.

Lord David Owen is the author of Hubris Syndrome: Bush, Blair and the Intoxication of Power (Methuen, revised edition 2012).