

Lies, distortions and arms sales

Unless we apply the lesson “all governments are liars” to our own leaders, British fighter jets and chemical weapons technology will continue to wreck lives all over the world.

The conscious nature of Tony Blair’s lies and distortions over Iraq is now clear. Collectors will have their favourites. Mine is his statement in parliament on 29 January that “we do know of links between al-Qaeda and Iraq”. As the intelligence agencies have repeatedly confirmed, there were no links, and Blair would have known this. Looking back, this lie sought to justify his statement, in October 2001, that there would be “a wider war” against Iraq only if there was “absolute evidence” of its complicity in 11 September. Of course, there was no evidence, and Blair must have known that, too.

On 12 March, he told parliament that France “is saying, whatever the circumstances, it will veto a resolution” to invade Iraq. Two days earlier, President Jacques Chirac had said the very opposite: that if Iraq failed to cooperate with the UN inspectors, “it will be for the Security Council and it alone to decide the right thing [and] war would become inevitable”. It was this deception that disillusioned even Clare Short.

Blair’s festival of lies has shocked some people: those who still believe that their elected representatives tell the truth. Perhaps they are prepared to tolerate some “fudge”, but not deliberate lies, especially those, such as Blair’s, that lead to the criminal killing of thousands of people.

Is he unusual? The great American muckraker I F Stone said: “All governments are liars and nothing they say should be believed.” To which the great Irish muckraker Claud Cockburn added: “Never believe anything until it is officially denied.”

They were referring to governments that could not be called to account for their actions, regardless of their democratic gloss. The Blair government

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exemplifies this corruption, which is the “democratic totalitarianism” that Orwell described. It has many institutional forms; the most enduring is the Foreign Office where, as the Scott inquiry into the arms-to-Iraq scandal was told, there is “a culture of lying”.

For almost 20 years, the Foreign Office denied that the Suharto regime in Indonesia was using British-supplied Hawk fighter-bombers (and armoured cars and machine-guns) against defenceless people in illegally occupied East Timor, where a third of the population was wiped out by the Indonesian occupation. These lies were faithfully echoed by journalists. I remember the BBC’s Jeremy Paxman saying that even if Blair’s new “ethical” foreign policy had stopped the sale of Hawk aircraft, the presence of the aircraft in East Timor was “not proved”, which was precisely the line.

The truth was the opposite; the use of Hawks in East Timor had been proved, over and over again, and the Foreign Office knew this, as Robin Cook was forced to admit in 1999 when a Hawk flew low over the East Timorese capital in full view of the foreign media.

Most of the lying is conducted at a routine “low level”, in letters signed by officials and junior ministers. I have filled half a filing cabinet with them.

A recent example: two New Statesman readers wrote to their MP following a reference of mine in January to Britain selling chemical weapons to Israel. Nigel Griffiths, minister at the Department of Trade and Industry, replied that the allegation was “entirely without foundation” and claimed that Britain had destroyed all its chemical weapons.

What he omitted to say was that chemical weapons technology and capability are still being manufactured in Britain and sold to some 26 countries, including Israel. These are toxic chemical precursors, or TCPs, the sale of which is banned under the Chemical Weapons Convention. British sales of TCPs are recorded in the government’s Strategic Export Control Annual Report, which is a model of obscurantism. In effect, it hides them and other banned or borderline weapons technology.

This was revealed a year ago in the Glasgow Sunday Herald by the investigative journalist Neil Mackay (“Britain’s chemical bazaar”, 9 June 2002). The DTI had admitted to Mackay that the sales of TCPs had been authorised by the government, even though it was not known what they would be used for. As Mackay pointed out, the Chemical Weapons Convention says the export of TCPs can go ahead only when it is clear that their ultimate use is not prohibited under the convention. In other words, the British government can license TCPs only

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when it is 100 per cent certain that they will not be weaponised. In any case, Griffiths's officials told Mackay that promises about them being for use in agriculture could easily be broken. "It is impossible to know what happens to them in the stages that come after they leave Britain," said one official.

Professor Julian Perry Robinson of the Science and Technology Policy Research Unit at Sussex University, an expert on the Chemical Weapons Convention, said a TCP such as dimethyl methylphosphonate could easily be turned into sarin nerve gas. Sarin was the agent used in the 1995 attack on the Tokyo Underground, which killed 12 people. "Every single chemical warfare agent can be made from toxic chemical precursors," he said.

The Blair government has approved the sale of these toxic precursors to regimes that have not even signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, such as Israel, Libya, Taiwan and Syria. Moreover, it has carried on this trade while Blair has lied about the "threat" of Iraq's chemical weapons.

This is hardly surprising. Under Blair, Britain has reclaimed its place as the world's second biggest weapons dealer. Britain sells to 50 countries engaged in conflict, including both sides in the India/Pakistan conflict. Last year, when Blair was in the subcontinent playing "peacemaker", he was secretly tying up a deal with India for the same Hawk fighters that devastated East Timor. He has backed Britain's biggest ever and most corrupt arms deal – with the unstable and repressive dictatorship in Saudi Arabia, a birthplace of al-Qaeda.

Lying about these matters, about war and peace, is not new. Addressing the French public in 1767, Voltaire wrote: "Anyone who has the power to make you believe absurdities has the power to make you commit injustices." It is time we denied them that power. **JP**