

Hutton whitewash leaves Blair in dock

By David Miller

counterpunch.org | January 30, 2004

The Hutton report gave an immediate political victory to the Blair government. But the all-embracing nature of the whitewash means that a spectre is haunting the Blair government. By bracketing off the issue of the reliability of the September 2002 dossier and – not widely noticed – whether the government knew it was unreliable, he fails to put the government in the clear in the wider court of public and world opinion.

According to Alastair Campbell, Hutton shows that ‘the government told the truth, the Prime Minister told the truth, I told the truth’. Similarly Blair claimed that the allegation that he had ‘misled the country’ is itself the ‘real lie’. But Hutton did not say that the claim that the government ‘probably knew’ was untrue. He said it was ‘unfounded’ – not necessarily the same thing – and he defined his terms of reference so narrowly that questions of intelligence were ruled out. His conclusions on the claim that Iraq could launch chemical and biological weapons in 45 minutes, precisely echo Blair’s attempt to spin the BBC report. ‘The idea that we authorised or made our intelligence services invent’ the evidence ‘is absurd’ said Blair on the day after the original Radio Four report. Hutton exonerates the government on the grounds the 45-minute claim was regarded by the intelligence agencies as ‘reliable’.

But the allegation on the BBC was not that the intelligence on the 45 minutes claim was invented or even untrue but that it was ‘sexed up’. As Andrew Gilligan himself put it on the 29th May 2003, the information ‘did come from the [intelligence] agencies’. The 45 minute claim in the dossier was that Iraq ‘can deliver chemical and biological agents using an extensive range of artillery shells, free-fall bombs, sprayers and ballistic missiles the Iraq military are able to deploy these weapons within 45 minutes of a decision to do so’ (p.17).

This claim involves at least three separate falsehoods known at the time. First, that the chemical and biological agents existed and were weaponised, which the UN reports used as evidence by the government in the dossier suggested was untrue. Second, that the Iraqi’s had long range delivery mechanisms in breach of UN resolution 1441; also suggested by the

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UN to be untrue. Third that such weapons could be deployed in 45 minutes. The claim on 45-minutes was revealed at the Hutton inquiry by both John Scarlett of the JIC and Sir Richard Dearlove, the head of MI6, to refer only to battlefield weapons, which was known at the time by the government. Hutton, in other words, exonerates the government of something of which they were not accused.

The wider issue this raises involves the further erosion of public trust in the mechanisms of liberal democracy leading to an ever increasing need for the Blair government to use all possible means of deception and spin to maintain power in the face of a deeply sceptical electorate. Blair appears not to recognise the magnitude of the allegations against him claiming that 'there could not be a more serious charge' than that of 'deception, duplicity or deceit'.

But, in fact the case against Blair involves not simply 'deception' but deception with the purpose of a pre-emptive attack on a third world nation already crippled by sanction resulting in up to 40,000 deaths. The allegation in other words is of war crimes in which duplicity and deception performed a key strategic role. It is this which is the spectre which will continue to haunt Blair and his government.

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