

Iraq: the new cover-up

Secret draft of the Iraq WMD dossier written by a Foreign Office spin-doctor

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“I made the point before it was published that the dossier was not supported by the intelligence. I was overruled. I have always found it hard to believe that the explanation for this was the incompetence of those in intelligence who approved the dossier. But if the government spinners were doing more than polish a final product, if they were driving the drafting to meet the policy requirement from the start, that might explain it.”

(Dr Brian Jones, former head of the branch of the Defence Intelligence Staff)

A secret first full draft of the Iraq WMD dossier, which shows how Tony Blair persuaded parliament of the case for war, is being concealed by the government. This draft was not written by the intelligence services, as Whitehall claims, but by a Foreign Office spin-doctor.

The government is withholding a secret draft of the Iraq WMD dossier that was never disclosed to the Hutton inquiry, the New Statesman can reveal. In a development that will stoke demands for a full parliamentary inquiry into the events that led up to the war, we can confirm that the draft was written not by the intelligence services, which had responsibility for the accuracy of the information contained in the dossier, but by a senior Foreign and Commonwealth Office press officer, whose name has previously featured only on the fringes of the controversy over Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction. It raises the possibility that the dossier originated with the government’s spin machine rather than the intelligence services. This secret draft may even turn out to be the foundation of the government’s ill-fated presentation of the threat from Saddam’s WMD, which Tony Blair used to persuade parliament of the case for war.

The existence of the secret draft has been confirmed by the Foreign Office, but it has refused to release it despite repeated freedom of information requests.

The draft was written on 9 September 2002 by John Williams, director of news at the Foreign Office. Williams is a former Daily Mirror political journalist, who was cleared to work closely with the intelligence services along with a number of other Whitehall civil servants during the run-up to war.

Had it not been for the doggedness of a Surrey-based charity researcher, Christopher Ames, the draft might have remained buried in the Foreign Office forever. Ames had followed the Hutton inquiry closely, and noticed that, although the draft was referred to in the Hutton evidence, the document itself was never disclosed. Ames contacted the Foreign Office, asking for disclosure of the draft. It has taken two years to force the Foreign Office to admit

that the draft even exists, and Ames's complaint about the continued failure to disclose it is currently with the Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, who has the final say on the matter. Meanwhile, the Foreign Office has confirmed to Ames that it was Jack Straw's personal decision not to release the draft when he was foreign secretary and his successor, Margaret Beckett, has chosen to uphold this.

Ames contacted the *New Statesman*, and, in response to my inquiries, the Foreign Office wrote: "As you set out, the Williams draft was the subject of an FOI request in 2005. The FCO did not disclose the draft and that decision was upheld by the subsequent internal review . . . The FCO remains satisfied that its application of the FOI Act was correct and has no plans to release the draft pending the outcome of the case before the Information Commissioner."

Who had "ownership"?

According to the documents disclosed to Hutton, the first full draft of the dossier was produced on 10 September, and signed off by John Scarlett, chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), the man in charge of the drafting process and who now heads MI6. It was at this point that it was presented to Downing Street. The government's case during the Hutton inquiry and since has been that Scarlett always had "ownership" of the dossier. The existence of an earlier version suggests that this account may not be accurate.

From the spring of 2002, there had been considerable media speculation that the government was working on a document to persuade parliament and the British public of the danger of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. By the summer, this was thought to have been shelved because the evidence was not compelling. However, at a July meeting in Downing Street, it was decided that it was necessary to wage an information campaign "to prepare public opinion in the UK that it is necessary to take military action against Saddam".

What happened next is crucial to an understanding of the events that led to war.

A paper was commissioned by the JIC, speculating on Saddam's potential military capabilities. During this period, new intelligence emerged that became central to Blair's case for war. At the end of August, the government received a small number of top secret "CX reports" from MI6 which contained, among other things, the now notorious claim that the Iraqi military could deploy chemical and biological weapons within 45 minutes.

On 3 September, the Prime Minister announced from his Sedgefield constituency that a public dossier would be presented to parliament when it was recalled on 24 September. The drafting of the dossier began immediately. In a parallel process, the JIC staff worked on its report assessing the possible WMD threat and on the dossier.

When the Joint Intelligence Committee met a day after Blair's speech, it asked its assessment staff to insert the 45-minute claim into its latest report but, crucially, the JIC staff decided not to include it in the dossier at this stage: the information was regarded as insufficiently conclusive. The question remains: who noticed the significance of the claim between 4 September and the 10th, at which point it made its first official appearance in the dossier?

Media-friendly offer

Williams was closely involved in the drafting process. An email disclosed during the Hutton inquiry shows that on 6 September, he wrote to Alastair Campbell, director of communications at No 10, to tell him that he had Straw's permission to carry out a "media-friendly editorial job" on the dossier. Until now, it has always been suggested that the offer was not taken up.

Two meetings on the dossier took place on 9 September, both of which were attended by Williams. During the Hutton inquiry, questions were raised about Williams's involvement at this point, following the disclosure of an email from Daniel Puce, a Downing Street official, promising "some quick thoughts on John's draft of 9 September". The email was circulated on 10 September to several individuals involved in the government's media operation, including Alastair Campbell. The email also suggests that Puce was expecting to see a further draft from Williams on the 11th.

Scarlett was questioned by Lord Hutton about the 9 September draft and asked to whom the "John" referred in the email. "I am virtually certain this is a reference to work put forward by John Williams from the Foreign Office," he said. Pressed further by the Hutton inquiry's lawyers as to whether Williams's work could be seen as the beginnings of a foreword to the dossier, Scarlett said the Foreign Office's head of press had redrafted not just the foreword but the text itself. Despite this, the inquiry never asked to see the document. Scarlett went on to imply that Williams had not been operating with the full authority of the JIC chairman. "So he was really on his own initiative working on that and had circulated it to No 10 inter alia probably . . . on the 9th," he said.

The issue of Williams's involvement was also raised with Campbell during the Hutton inquiry. Asked whether anyone had offered to help with the writing, Campbell said: "John Williams offered to write it full time." But he later added that Williams's "kind offer" had been refused. "I emphasised that the credibility of this document depended fundamentally upon it being the work of the Joint Intelligence Committee; and that was the touchstone of our approach right through this from that moment."

The inquiry's lead lawyer asked directly: "We have not been given a copy of a dossier on 9 September. Do you recall whether or not at 9 September there was a dossier?" Campbell replied: "No there was not". (In his evidence he then appears to confuse the 9th and 10th, and so it may be the case that he simply did not remember the earlier draft.)

In his own evidence to the Hutton inquiry, Williams made no mention of his draft, although he confirmed his presence at meetings on 5, 9 and 17 September on the dossier.

John Williams has since left the Foreign Office and was travelling in Romania when contacted by the New Statesman. In a telephone interview, he said he could not give definitive answers without the relevant papers in front of him, but confirmed his involvement in the drafting process in early September after the PM's Sedgefield speech. "As the FCO communications officer I would write it up and see how it looked. I just took the material and put it together," he said. The key question, impossible to answer without the disclosure of the draft is: which material? Pressed on this, Williams said: "I was looking at material that was already there. When I took that material away, it didn't have the 45 minutes in it."

Challenge to government story

It is also impossible to know how closely Williams's draft (said to number 50 pages) resembles John Scarlett's draft of a day later. Asked what he thought of the failure to disclose his draft, Williams told the NS: "I'm very happy with the Foreign Office's decision." Asked if he knew the reasons for that decision, he said he was not prepared to comment.

The former FCO director of news said he was "absolutely sure" the 45-minute claim was not in his draft. So what exactly did it contain and why is the Foreign Office so afraid to release it? Whatever the case, the close involvement of Williams in this key period of the drafting is a challenge to the government's story that the intelligence services retained "ownership throughout".

Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money has already been spent on inquiries into why we went to war in Iraq . The government has been adamant that there will be no further inquiry, at least while British troops remain in action. After four inquiries, Downing Street might have hoped that existence of the "Williams draft" might never have come to light, but it could provide a cheap and simple way to reassure the public that it has nothing to hide. The release of the Williams document would resolve one of the central mysteries of the dossier: who wrote the first draft and how much deeply suspect intelligence did it already contain?

The government's problem is that the very existence of the secret draft suggests that its spin machine was more deeply involved in the production of the dossier than it has previously admitted.

Last night critics of the government's use of intelligence in the run-up to the Iraq war reacted angrily to news of the secret draft. Adam Price, the Plaid Cymru MP who has led calls for a full Parliamentary Inquiry into the war said: "The entire Iraq debate essentially hangs on one central question - were the facts massaged or manipulated to suit a predetermined policy? If the first draft of the now infamous dossier was indeed penned not by a spook but a spin doctor then all the Government's denials in Hutton, Butler and beyond are exposed as just another layer of mendacity."

Meanwhile the former BBC journalist, Andrew Gilligan, whose report on the WMD dossier was a key part of the chain of events that led to the Hutton Inquiry, commented: "This is potentially extremely significant: a missing link in what we understand about the dossier".

And Dr Brian Jones, former head of the branch of the Defence Intelligence Staff dealing with WMD added: "I made the point before it was published that the dossier was not supported by the intelligence. I was overruled. I have always found it hard to believe that the explanation for this was the incompetence of those in intelligence who approved the dossier. But if the government spinners were doing more than polish a final product, if they were driving the drafting to meet the policy requirement from the start, that might explain it."

[http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab_3_0007to0020.pdf]

[http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab_11_0018to0019.pdf]

[http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/cab/cab_11_0021.pdf]

[http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/dos/dos_2_0002to0057.pdf]

[<http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/transcripts/hearing-trans09.htm>]

[<http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/transcripts/hearing-trans12.htm>]

[<http://www.the-hutton-inquiry.org.uk/content/transcripts/hearing-trans18.htm>]

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