

Secret emails show Iraq dossier was 'sexed up'

Intelligence chiefs criticised 'iffy drafting' of key document

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Secret Whitehall emails released yesterday provide damning new evidence that the notorious dossier making the case for invading Iraq was "sexed up".

They disclose that the intelligence services were sceptical over the "iffy drafting" of government claims that Saddam Hussein could mount a missile strike on his neighbours within 45 minutes of ordering an attack.

Officials privately mocked assertions that the Iraqi president was covertly trying to develop a nuclear capability and wisecracked that perhaps he had recruited "Dr Frankenstein" to his supposed crack team of nuclear scientists.

The release of a series of confidential memos and emails, following a protracted Freedom of Information battle, reignited the controversy over accusations that Tony Blair's government "spun" Britain into war.

Last night both the Tories and the Liberal Democrats renewed their demands for a full public inquiry into the decision to join the US-led invasion of Iraq.

The 45-minute claim – presented to MPs in a notorious dossier on 24 September 2002, six months before military action began – was central to the Blair government's justification for war.

But a memo sent 13 days earlier by Desmond Bowen, head of the Cabinet Office defence secretariat, to John Scarlett, who was head of the Joint Intelligence Committee, suggested he had grave reservations over the threat. His comments were copied to Mr Blair's press secretary Alastair Campbell and to his chief-of-staff Jonathan Powell.

Mr Bowen wrote: "The question we have to have in the back of our mind is: 'Why now?' I think we have moved away from promoting the ideas that we are in imminent danger of attack and ... intend to act in pre-emptive self-defence."

He argued instead that the Government should stress Saddam's disregard for international law and his continuing drive to obtain weapons of mass destruction.

Another memo, dated 16 September 2002, from an unnamed official, also suggests exaggerated claims were being included in the about-to-be-published report. It said: "I note that the paper suggests that Saddam's biotech efforts have gone much further than we ever feared. Page 4 Bullet 4: '[Iraq] has assembled specialists to work on its nuclear programme' – Dr Frankenstein I presume? Sorry. It's getting late."

A further email released yesterday, arguing for amendments to the report, says: "We have suggested moderating the same language in much the same way on drafts from the dim and distant past without success. Feel free to try again!"

A fourth email, sent by the then foreign secretary Jack Straw's private secretary, makes clear he wants language that can be conveyed very simply by the media. He wrote: "This should be brief enough to get on to the Sky wall – ie no more than five bullets."

Last night William Hague, the shadow Foreign Secretary, said: "This is the latest in a steady stream of damaging revelations about the events leading up to the Iraq war. These minutes shed interesting light on the process by which the caveats in the Joint Intelligence Committee's original assessment of Iraq's WMD programmes were stripped out of the dossier that was presented to Parliament and the British people."

"Now British troops are coming home, there is no longer any excuse for delaying a full-scale inquiry into the origins and conduct of the Iraq war, other than the Government's concern that its own reputation might be damaged."

Ed Davey, the Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman, said: "This confirms the widely-held suspicions that leading officials and political advisers close to Tony Blair were deliberately tweaking the presentation of the intelligence to bolster the case for war on Iraq. The jigsaw of how the public and some MPs were duped nears completion with this crucial revelation, and further strengthens the case for a full public inquiry."

The emails: How 'sexing-up' was achieved

11 September 2002 Desmond Bowen: "The question we have to have in the back of our mind is: 'Why now?' I think we have moved away from promoting the ideas that we are in imminent danger of attack and intend to act in pre-emptive self-defence... In looking at the WMD sections, you will clearly want to be as firm and authoritative as you can be. You will clearly need to judge the extent to which you need to hedge your judgements with, for example, 'it is almost certain' and similar caveats."

11 September 2002 Mark Sedwill: "I would expand the history of weapons inspections. It is an interesting story and would give the media a better feel for the difficulties they faced and the persistence of the Iraqi obstruction... We need a very simple table somewhere... This should be brief enough to get on to the Sky wall – ie no more than five bullets."

16 September 2002 Unnamed official (thought to be intelligence agent): "I note that the paper suggests that Saddam's biotech efforts have gone much further than we ever feared. Page 4 Bullet 4: '[Iraq] has assembled specialists to work on its nuclear programme' – Dr Frankenstein I presume? Sorry. It's getting late... We have suggested moderating the same language in much the same way on drafts from the dim and distant past without success. Feel free to try again!... Lots of 'ranges' close together – iffy drafting."

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