

War Crimes Iraq: Chilcot Report Countdown - at Last Zero Hour Approaches

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Television trailers for re-runs of Yes, Minister – a sitcom beloved of Margaret Thatcher because it allowed her to blame civil servants for her own misjudgements – contained the line: “I’m not interested in the truth... what shall I tell Parliament?” It always gets a laugh, but in a few weeks’ time, who will be laughing?

Tony Blair has been keen to get his reaction in first ahead of the long-delayed Chilcot report into the Iraq War, fuelling suspicion that he will refuse to accept any verdict that he committed Britain to the invasion before he told Parliament and the public. In an interview, the former Prime Minister said he did not think anyone could say he did not make his position clear ahead of the 2003 war that led to the toppling of Saddam Hussein. So far, so utterly predictable. But he is right to be worried.

The inquiry was set up in 2009 by then premier Gordon Brown to examine the lead-up to the invasion, from the summer of 2001 up until the withdrawal of the main body of British troops.

The report’s publication will follow 130 sessions of oral evidence, the testimony of more than 150 witnesses and is more than 2.5 million words long. The inquiry analysed more than 150,000 government documents as well as other material related to the invasion. The total number of UK troops killed in operations in Iraq has reached 179 after a soldier died from a gunshot wound in Basra in February 2009.

Much of the most damning evidence is in the public domain. During the inquiry hearings, Sir John Chilcot focused in particular on evidence suggesting Blair had given a firm commitment to back President George W Bush’s decision to invade while he was publicly saying a final decision had not yet been taken.

In the first two days of the hearing, in November 2009, Chilcot was told by Sir William Ehrman, the Foreign Office’s director general for defence and intelligence between 2002 and 2004, that the UK received intelligence days before invading Iraq that Saddam Hussein may not have been able to use chemical weapons.

The same month the inquiry heard that Blair’s stance on Iraq “tightened” after a private meeting with Bush in April 2002, according to Sir Christopher Meyer, then the UK’s ambassador to the United States. Military preparations for war overrode the diplomatic process and he criticised post-war planning for Iraq as a “black hole”.

The UK's ambassador to the United Nations, Sir Jeremy Greenstock said the invasion was of "questionable legitimacy" as it was not backed by the majority of UN members or possibly even the British public.

The US "assumed" the UK would contribute troops to the invasion even if there was no UN backing, according to then head of UK armed forces Admiral Lord Boyce.

Major General David Wilson, the UK's chief military advisor to the US Central Army Command told the inquiry there was no talk of Iraq among top US commanders in the spring of 2002 but this "changed suddenly" in June when he said the "curtain was drawn back" on their thinking.

Through much of 2010 the inquiry also heard that Blair was "reluctant" to hold Cabinet discussions about Iraq because he thought details would be leaked, according to former civil service head Sir Gus O'Donnell. Blair did not believe his Cabinet was "a safe space" in which to debate the issues involved in going to war. The number of informal meetings held under Blair meant records of discussions were not "as complete" as he would have liked.

Former Cabinet Secretary Lord Wilson said that he alerted Blair to the legal issues involved - which he saw as being a brake on military action.

In separate evidence, his successor as Cabinet Secretary, Lord Turnbull said the Cabinet "did not know the score" about Iraq when they were asked to back military action in March 2003. Ministers had not seen key material on Iraq policy and were effectively "imprisoned" as they knew opposing the use of force would likely have led Blair's resignation.

Including the 45-minute claim in an intelligence dossier on Iraq's weapons was "asking for trouble", Blair's former security co-ordinator Sir David Omand said. He described it as a "bit of local colour" which was used because there was little other detail that the intelligence services were happy to be included in the September 2002 dossier.

Air Marshall Sir Brian Burridge, who led UK ground forces in Iraq, said he was told by a top US commander 10 months before that it was a "matter of when not if" they went into Iraq.

And the inquiry has been "too easy-going" in grilling witnesses about the lead-up to the war, a former UK diplomat said. Carne Ross said Sir John Chilcot was running a "narrow" investigation, with the standard of questioning "pretty low". At the Hay literary festival in Powys, author Tom Bower forecast that criticism of Blair will not go far enough. Bower, the author of a scathing biography of Blair that portrays him as a man with few policies and no ideology, said:

"Chilcot in my view will criticise the wrong people, the easy targets... the Cabinet Secretary, the Chief of the Defence Staff, who was not told the truth. The man obviously to blame is Blair... but he won't be blamed for lying, that will not happen."

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