

Hutton Inquiry: British media warns of a whitewash too far

By Julie Hyland
30 January 2004

In the wake of the Hutton Inquiry report exonerating Prime Minister Tony Blair of any blame for events leading up to the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly, Blair has declared himself and his government vindicated and urged the resignation of all those who suggested he had lied about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in advance of the war. However, the consensus view in the British press was that Hutton's whitewash of Blair was so crude as to have virtually no legitimacy, and cautioned the government against its heady triumphalism.

The *Independent* warned, "Mr. Blair's triumphalism is mistaken: this unbalanced report does not vindicate his decision to go to war", whilst the *Financial Times* opined that Hutton's findings were "unlikely to end the controversy that began with the suicide of the distinguished weapons inspector.... The government escapes too lightly for its role in outing Mr. Kelly, and the questions raised about the use of intelligence were beyond Lord Hutton's remit."

Guardian columnist Jonathan Freedland complained that if Hutton's inquiry were a show in the West End, it "could only have one name: Whitewash," whilst Paul Routledge in the *Mirror* wrote that Hutton's "establishment whitewash of wrongdoing in high places which caused a man to kill himself stinks to high heaven."

The *Daily Telegraph* noted that, "there is a strange disjunction between the sober workings of government as portrayed in the Hutton report, and what we know from the evidence to the inquiry of what was going on the ground at the time."

Only the Rupert Murdoch *Times* and *Sun* newspapers crowded with self-satisfaction at the outcome, claiming that Hutton had "executed his unenviable task commendably" and "performed a massive public service."

What accounts for these concerns within the media? After all, it is not the first time that a judge has whitewashed a major government scandal. From Lord Denning's report into the Profumo affair in 1963, to Lord Scarman's 1981 inquiry into the Brixton riots, time and again the British ruling class has been able to depend upon their law lords to

cover their tracks.

Moreover, no one in the media really believed Blair would be indicted for the fraudulent justifications he used to drag the country into an illegal war. Not only were the terms of Hutton's remit heavily circumscribed in advance, but also every section of the state apparatus had too much to lose from such an investigation. The government, the intelligence services, the Conservative opposition and most of the media itself—all were complicit in backing the prime minister's drive to war.

But Lord Hutton's inquiry was at least in part intended to provide some form of catharsis. It was a means to resolve the internal squabbling within the state, whilst satisfying public opinion that people's concerns over the war had been honestly addressed and taken on board.

On past occasions this would have meant throwing a bit of sand in people's faces by apportioning at least some blame to the government or its representatives in order to make a show of "impartiality".

This was considered especially necessary in the case of the Hutton inquiry, where the internecine conflict between the government, intelligence services, and the BBC had become so bitter that it had spilled out into the open. More so because the conflict was followed closely by broad layers of the public—many of whom had marched in their hundreds of thousands against the war with Iraq, and who hoped that Blair would now be held to some form of account for the lies he told over Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to justify that war.

Received wisdom was that in time honoured fashion Hutton would bestow just enough responsibility on each of the contending parties that none could be held fully culpable. The media had forecast that the most likely scenario of Hutton's inquiry would be that the BBC and its reporter Andrew Gilligan would be criticised for certain inaccuracies in its reporting, whilst the government would be found wanting in its handling of Kelly's outing as the source of reports that it had "sexed up" intelligence material on Iraq. Gilligan could be offered as a scapegoat by the

BBC, and perhaps Campbell or Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon for the government.

Instead, after months in which the numerous lies and inconsistencies within the government's case for war were laid bare in public, with even David Kay, head of the CIA-backed United Nation Weapons Inspectors, admitting Iraq has no weapons of mass destruction, Hutton's unvarnished snow job for the government threatens to ratchet up public mistrust and hostility even further.

As Routledge complained in his *Mirror* column, "Nothing is more likely to induce cynicism among voters than this tawdry exercise in fake judicial investigation."

Or as one reader's letter in the *Guardian* explained appositely, "An inept DIY bodger could tell you, whitewash, applied carefully and thinly, will last years. Too thick and it will flake off in no time."

The concern within the media is that so crude and hamfisted is Hutton's exercise in political DIY that it has undermined the fundamental purpose of the inquiry itself.

Amongst the numerous inconsistencies pointed to by commentators on Hutton's findings, several stand out.

* Hutton said that the worst that could be said on charges of government "sexing up" its intelligence material was that the prime minister's desire to make the case for war may "subconsciously" have influenced John Scarlett, head of the Joint Intelligence Committee, which was responsible for issuing the September 2002 dossier. He never explains why this need only be "subconscious" given that Campbell chaired "presentation" meetings of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) on the dossier—something specifically criticised by earlier parliamentary investigations—and the fact that there were numerous e-mails and directives from Number 10 advising the JIC on the formulations to be used.

* Nor did Hutton explain why the BBC should be held responsible for relying on a single "unverifiable" source (Kelly) for its account of disquiet in the intelligence services over the September dossier, whereas it was OK for the government and the security services for relying on a single source (the Iraqi National Alliance) claiming that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that could be launched in 45-minutes, which necessitated going to war (a claim that the INA has now admitted was fraudulent).

* The inquiry heard from intelligence official Dr. Bryan Jones that the dossier's claim that Iraq could deploy weapons of mass destruction within 45-minutes had been "over-egged" due to pressure from "spin merchants" in Number 10—a statement that corroborated Gilligan's main accusations. During the inquiry it also emerged, from Scarlett himself that the 45-minute claim referred only to battlefield weapons, not long range armaments—making a mockery of Iraq's supposed threat to world security. But

just as he did on all other issues relating to the justifications for the war, Hutton ruled that the distinction between the two types of weaponry "does not fall within my remit".

* Not only did Hutton rule out any examination of the government's conduct over the war within the Inquiry, he insisted no such examination was permissible anywhere. The media's right to investigate government actions and claims must be qualified by the fact that "false accusations of fact impugning the integrity of others, including politicians, should not be made."

This last point is of particular concern to many journalists who have correctly interpreted it as a fundamental attack on freedom of speech.

Several commentators have sought to explain Hutton's one-sidedness with reference to his conservative, establishment profile. A long-time senior Ulster Judge, Hutton is undoubtedly a stalwart defender of the British bourgeoisie. But there isn't a Law Lord that would not fit such a description—indeed it is a basic requirement of the job.

The outcome of Hutton's inquiry is not simply a personal affair. Rather, Hutton's inability to perform a more effective snowjob, his apparent indifference to the popular outrage his report will generate, points to more fundamental processes within the body politic.

The entire apparatus of rule is internally rotten and corrupt—upheld only through lies, deceit and the threat of force. The days when the ruling elite could lift the corner on a scandal, in order to keep the rest under wraps, have long past. Such a state of affairs was feasible only under conditions where it was possible to mediate class antagonisms by making some concessions to workers' interests through social reforms.

The bourgeoisie in its entirety has repudiated such a programme, glorifying the free market and the unprecedented social polarisation that has accompanied it. The result is that politics within Britain has become so far removed from the interests and concerns of the broad mass of the population, and so exclusively the preserve of an extremely wealthy and privileged oligarchy, that it is impossible to speak of a democratic process in any meaningful way.

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