

Australia: another Senate committee whitewash of government lies on Iraq

By Richard Phillips
1 September 2005

Australia's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Senate Committee report into "Duties of Australian Personnel in Iraq," released on August 18, is a political whitewash. The inquiry, which was dominated by Labor Party and other opposition Senators, embraces the latest round of government lies over Australia's participation in the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq and the so-called "war on terror".

The inquiry was established after a series of damning public statements from Dr Rod Barton on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program on February 15. Barton, a biological weapons expert who had worked for Australian defence intelligence and the UN, and was a senior member of the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) searching for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) until his resignation in 2004.

Contradicting government claims that Australians were not interrogating Iraqi prisoners, Barton told the program that he had interrogated Iraqi prisoners at the US-run Camp Cropper in 2003. He raised concerns about the treatment of prisoners in Camp Cropper, including extensive use of solitary confinement, beatings and other forms of abuse of detainees as part of a "disorientation process, softening up, a sort of purgatory before they actually finished up in prison..."

Barton saw photographs of prisoners with extensive abrasions and bruising on their faces and was suspicious about the death of Iraqi scientist Dr Muhammad Munim al-Azmerli, whom he believed had been beaten to death by US military guards.

Barton also explained to "Four Corners" that he had come under pressure from a senior ISG official and a CIA representative to modify an interim report in mid-February 2004 on the search for weapons of mass destruction. He was told by ISG chief Charles Duelfer to produce a report "that had no conclusions"—in other words, to give the impression that WMDs could be found. Duelfer used this report to tell the US Congress that although it had not found any weapons of mass destruction, the ISG continued "to receive reports all the time that there are hidden weapons".

Barton objected to the interrogations and the interim ISG report and informed senior Australian officials in Iraq and in Canberra about his concerns. Defence officials told him that they would investigate but none of his concerns were included in reports to defence department heads or to the relevant

ministers.

He received no replies on these issues and was shocked to suddenly hear Defence Minister Robert Hill publicly declare in June 2004, following revelations about the US torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib jail, that no Australians were involved in interrogating Iraqi prisoners.

Contrary to Hill's claims, senior government ministers not only knew about Barton's protests but had been warned about torture at Abu Ghraib prison in late 2003. They were also aware that Australian Army personnel had visited the notorious jail and even given lectures on interrogation techniques to some of those involved. One Australian officer worked with American military authorities to help write a legal justification for violations of the Geneva Conventions and deflect concerns raised by the International Red Cross.

When Barton contacted a senior defence department official over Hill's claims, he was told: "We regard that you did interviews not interrogations"—a response repeated by the defence minister following Barton's ABC interview.

Despite Barton's detailed exposure and additional information, including his resignation letter, which he provided to the inquiry, the Senate committee brushed aside his evidence and accepted all the government obfuscations.

The Senate report claimed that it was "not clear" whether Barton was involved in interrogations because "the meaning of the terms 'interview' and 'interrogation' appear to merge". This argument is an absurd attempt to justify the violation of the Geneva Conventions and the Australian military's own code of engagement for Iraq.

As Barton told "Four Corners," when a prisoner was brought to him in an orange jumpsuit with a guard with a gun standing behind him, then he regarded it as an interrogation. When asked to comment about the supposed difference between interviews and interrogations, former ISG chief David Kay, a right-wing Republican, also declared: "Look, it's not a distinction I make. I assume... that anyone in a room with a prisoner is engaged in an interrogation."

In response to Barton's revelations that US officials pressured various ISG personnel to modify their reports to suggest that WMDs could be found, the Senate committee declared that there was not "sufficiently strong evidence to

suggest that the ISG was unable to report frankly and fearlessly on what they had found”.

This assertion is bogus. Barton told the committee there were “blatant attempts to change our findings”, including information that debunked US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation to the UN Security Council in February 2003. “[T]here was no real objectivity in the investigation,” he said, “and it seemed to me that a lot of the direction, particularly in the chemical and biological areas, was coming from Washington.”

Barton’s resignation letter specifically referred to CIA pressure on the ISG stating: “The Agency’s attitude was there are weapons out there, we just have to find them.”

The problem was not the lack of “strong evidence” but the Senate committee’s unwillingness to seriously investigate Barton’s revelations. The committee simply accepted the refusal of government officials and other former ISG members, to testify or provide documents. This included Dr Gee, a senior Foreign Affairs officer and specialised weapons analyst, who also quit the ISG not long after Barton.

Dr Gee wrote a five-page resignation letter to Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. He apparently voiced concerns that the ISG’s March 2004 report had been doctored to downplay the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Gee also met with Downer, Defence Minister Hill and the prime minister’s office at this time, even as government ministers were claiming that weapons of mass destruction would be found.

Labor Senator John Faulkner told parliament that Dr Gee’s failure to testify “stymied the work of the committee” and meant that it was “unable to get closer to the truth of the Australian participation in the interrogation of Iraqi prisoners.” Faulkner declared that the opposition would “pursue these issues relentlessly”.

Faulkner’s protests are a fraud. Labor, Democrat and Greens Senators, who had a majority in the Senate up until July 31 and initiated the inquiry, had the power to subpoena Dr Gee and other witnesses but did not do so.

The Senate committee blithely passed over the blatant lies by Defence Minister Hill and other senior government ministers who claimed that Australians had not interrogated Iraqi prisoners. The problem, it claimed, was “ineffective record-keeping, unclear and haphazard reporting processes and poor communications networks”. This meant that defence and foreign affairs departments were “unable to present a coherent, detailed and accurate account” and therefore senior government ministers were not fully informed.

In other words, the inquiry rubberstamped what has become the government’s standard operating procedure: when exposed, claim ignorance and blame the lower ranks and poor systems. The Senate committee’s recommendations proceeded along the same lines: to call for a “review of procedures” and to make all defence personnel “aware of the obligations with regard to

human rights issues” and to “report any activity that seems illegal”.

These comments are thoroughly cynical. As millions of people recognise, an illegal occupation of Iraq was based on lies—including the false claim that the Baathist regime had weapons of mass destruction. In the aftermath of the invasion, no effort, including the torture of prisoners, was spared to find such weapons, or, when that failed, evidence of “weapons programs”. Eventually nothing was discovered and the matter was dismissed as “an intelligence failure”.

Faced with Barton’s accusations, Labor and the other opposition MPs have covered up for the Howard government because they also subscribed to the lies about WMD in Iraq. None of the opposition parties opposed the Iraq war as such but simply called for it to be waged under the banner of the UN. Like the government they are politically responsible for the crimes of the US and Australian military in Iraq.

Significantly, the inquiry report did not even offer an opinion on, let alone probe the death of al-Azmerli, the Iraqi scientist whom Barton suggested had been murdered. It simply noted that a US military investigator had interviewed Barton over the scientist’s death and did not bother to report on whether the US military made any findings on the case.

The latest Senate inquiry, like others into the illegal actions of the Howard government—its claim that asylum seekers had thrown their children off refugee boats, its role in the death of 353 refugees when the SIEV-X boat sank in 2001, and last year’s investigation into the “accuracy” of intelligence on Iraq’s WMDs—is another cover-up for the government. As Liberal Senate committee member David Johnston declared, the report into Barton’s allegations provided “a clean bill of health”.

This was the last occasion in which opposition parties had the numbers to establish Senate investigations and dominate its committees, because the government now has a majority in the upper house. Labor’s final service to the Howard government in the Senate is another indication that the party is moving even further to the right to fully back any commitment by Canberra to the “war on terrorism” and attacks on fundamental democratic rights.

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