

British deputy prime minister admits Iraq war was illegal

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The statement by British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg that the Iraq war was “illegal” leads to only one conclusion—that former Prime Minister Tony Blair and many others must immediately be arraigned on war crimes charges.

Clegg was standing in for Prime Minister David Cameron in parliament on Tuesday when he made his statement—one of the few truthful remarks to have been heard from the government dispatch box.

Responding to questions from Labour’s Jack Straw, foreign secretary at the time of the invasion of Iraq, Clegg said of Straw, “We may have to wait for his memoirs, but perhaps one day he will account for his role in the most disastrous decision of all: the illegal invasion of Iraq.”

His charge was immediately attacked by Labour ministers and leading Army chiefs—and for good reason. As Philippe Sands, professor of law at University College London, pointed out, such a “public statement by a government minister in parliament as to the legal situation” could be grounds for the prosecution of British officials in an international court.

That was far from Clegg’s intent. Almost immediately he retreated from his remarks, issuing a statement that they had been made in a “personal capacity”. A spokesman said, “The coalition government has not expressed a view on the legality or otherwise of the Iraq conflict. But that does not mean that individual members of the government should not express their individual views. These are long-held views of the deputy prime minister.

“The Iraq inquiry is currently examining many issues surrounding the UK’s involvement in Iraq, including the legal basis of the war. The government looks forward to receiving the inquiry’s conclusions.”

The reference to the Iraq inquiry, currently being conducted by Sir John Chilcot, is a red herring. Its term

of reference specifically excludes ruling on the legality of the war. The inquiry issued its own statement repeating, “The inquiry is not a court of law, and no one is on trial.”

The Liberal Democrats have long made political capital out of their criticisms of the Iraq invasion. They had initially opposed the US-led war on the grounds of upholding the authority of the United Nations, but swung to supporting “our boys” once the invasion began. They had demanded a full and open inquiry into the war, which Clegg had described as the “biggest foreign policy mistake this country has made... since Suez” (the British-French invasion of Egypt in 1956).

Such public pronouncements were a significant factor in the vote the Liberal Democrats received in the general election earlier this year.

Clegg’s latest actions underscore the fraudulent character of his party’s “anti-war” stance. The deputy prime minister undoubtedly thought he could continue his political posturing against Labour without his statements having any real consequence. But the Liberal Democrats are now in a government that still maintains 400 troops in Iraq and plays a key role in the suppression of Afghanistan. Its coalition partners in the Conservative Party voted in support of the Iraq invasion and have defended it to the hilt.

The Tories backed up Clegg’s claim that his verdict on the Iraq war was solely a matter of personal opinion. Foreign Secretary William Hague, who voted for the war, said, “The deputy prime minister has a different history from mine” on the subject.

More fundamentally, the legality of the Iraq war is not a matter of “personal” opinion or individual historical interpretations. Under the precedent laid down by the Nuremberg Trials in 1946, the leaders of the United States and Britain are guilty under international law of the same criminal charge that was

brought against the Nazis: the waging of aggressive war.

As the Nuremberg verdict stated, “War is essentially an evil thing. Its consequences are not confined to the belligerent states alone, but affect the whole world. To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

There is no question that the United States and the UK launched a war of aggression against Iraq so as to advance their own strategic geo-political interests in the Middle East.

It is a matter of record that on January 30, 2003 Britain’s then-Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, informed Prime Minister Tony Blair that the use of military force against Iraq was illegal without sanction by the United Nations Security Council. Despite the continued absence of such a sanction, just two months later, following a visit to Washington, Goldsmith changed his mind and ruled an invasion legal.

Amongst those giving evidence to the Chilcot inquiry in the last week was Carne Ross, former First Secretary for the UK at the UN between 1997-2002 and responsible for liaison with UN weapons inspectors in Iraq. His statement made clear that Iraq did not pose a threat to Washington and London, had no “weapons of mass destruction” and no links with Al Qaeda, and that the “exaggeration” and “misleading statements” made about Iraq’s supposed threat “were, in their totality, lies”.

Ross stated, “In just war theory and international law, any country must exhaust all non-violent alternatives before resorting to force. It’s clear in this case that the UK government did not adequately consider let alone pursue non-military alternatives to the 2003 invasion”.

The Iraq invasion destroyed an entire country and cost the lives of more than a million people. Through a pre-emptive assault, Washington and London overthrew a regime considered an obstacle to their interests, executed its leader and imprisoned and killed anyone who got in their way. The ongoing occupation continues to devastate lives, as seen in the record levels of cancer, leukemia, infant mortality, and birth defects that have been recorded in the city of Fallujah.

In addition, the Iraq war was accompanied by an

array of measures abrogating democratic rights in the US and the UK under the guise of the “war on terror”. Extraordinary rendition, the jailing of “suspected” terrorists without trial, a clampdown on freedom of speech and, in Britain, the cold-blooded murder of Jean Charles de Menezes, are just some of the outcomes.

As Clegg is well aware, Blair and his leading ministers have blood on their hands. They could never have achieved their criminal objective, however, without the active support of the intelligence services, the Conservative opposition, the media and a host of compliant civil servants.

That is why Clegg beat an immediate retreat. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has insisted, the necessary redressing of the terrible catastrophe visited on the people of Iraq—including the prosecution of the architects of the invasion and the payment of billions in compensation—can only be achieved through the independent mobilisation of the working class against imperialist war and the capitalist profit system that causes it.

Julie Hyland

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