

UK: Chilcot Iraq War inquiry cover-up confirmed

By Robert Stevens
23 November 2016

New documents made available, as the result of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, confirm that the Chilcot report into the Iraq War was set up to ensure that those who organised and planned the illegal war would not be held accountable.

The Chilcot Inquiry, chaired by Sir John Chilcot, was established by Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown in 2009. Chilcot's report was only finally released seven years later, in July. The report provided sometimes devastating confirmation of the criminal role of the British and US officials who organized and led it, but it issued no finding on the legality of the invasion. No one, including then British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George W. Bush, the architects of the war, was called to account.

This was always going to be the outcome of the inquiry. Brown set it up with the limited remit of establishing the “lessons that can be learned” regarding British involvement in the US-led war. Its terms of reference ensured there would be no assigning of responsibility to any politician, civil servant, diplomat or military figure for their role in the events leading to the war, the military slaughter itself, or its aftermath. Those testifying were assured that no prosecutions or legal proceedings would arise from their appearances. Witnesses were not required to speak under oath and none of those testifying, including Blair and Brown, faced anything remotely near a proper cross-examination.

The papers confirming that this whitewash was the planned outcome were made public after Chris Lamb, an FOI campaigner, won a two-year court battle for the right to access classified memos by government officials relating to the setting up of the Chilcot Inquiry. The memos were all written in a four-week period in May and June 2009.

Labour government officials, including Brown himself, were opposed to any sort of public inquiry. They favoured an investigation by members of the secretive Privy Council—senior politicians who advise the monarch—along the lines of the Franks Inquiry into the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war. That inquiry, called by the then Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, has gone down in history as a whitewash and, as one commentator put it, “a classic establishment job.”

Writing to Brown's Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell, Cabinet Office official Ben Lyon said an inquiry could be designed to “focus on lessons and avoid blame.” A parliamentary inquiry, he warned, would lead to a “daily running commentary.”

In response, O'Donnell stated his agreement and told Brown a parliamentary inquiry would “threaten legal liability for individuals” and “take a long time.”

In June 2009, Brown announced that a Privy Council investigation into the war, to be held in secret, was to take place. He faced a public backlash and was forced to relent and authorise a public inquiry.

Even then, parts of the Chilcot Inquiry were still held in private “in the national interest.” Lamb told the *Observer*, “The inquiry was hobbled before it even started, with tight restrictions on what it could do that were not fully made public.”

That the Chilcot Inquiry was wholly a creature of the government and had no real independence is confirmed in the FOI documents. One of the memos by Lyon states that protocol was that the secretariat of the Chilcot Inquiry should not draw from civil servants and that those selected “should not have been involved in Iraq policy since 2002.” But O'Donnell immediately made Margaret Aldred the secretary of the inquiry, under conditions in which Aldred had chaired the Iraq

senior officials group during the period Chilcot was investigating. A previous FOI request by Lamb found that Aldred was directly nominated by O'Donnell, despite the inquiry's head of communications stating, "Sir John Chilcot had complete freedom to choose whoever he wanted both as Secretary and as head of communications."

It only gets worse! Other senior Blair government figures involved in the 2003 war, who were enlisted to establish the inquiry, included Sir Jeremy Heywood—Blair's parliamentary private secretary until 2003—and Sir John Scarlett, the chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) from 2004 to 2009. Scarlett was the nominal author of a draft intelligence dossier produced on September 16, 2002 that contained an executive summary stating that "intelligence" (in fact, a single source) allowed the government to judge Iraq "has military plans for the use of chemical and biological [weapons], some of which could be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them."

This was then published by the Blair government, with a foreword by Blair himself that focused on the 45-minute claim to justify war—an assertion that Blair then repeated in Parliament.

In another memo, O'Donnell advised that the Chilcot investigation be organised so that it would be prevented from reaching "any conclusion on questions of law or fact, which create circumstances which expose organizations, departments and/or individuals to criminal or civil proceedings or judicial review."

Central to this was that there were to be no judges or lawyers among the inquiry appointees. This was critical, wrote O'Donnell, in order to avoid a "legalistic" focus being adopted.

The cherry on the cake in ensuring that the inquiry would be utterly toothless was the appointment of Chilcot, the very safest pair of hands, to lead it. Chilcot became a Privy Counsellor in 2004 and was a member of the Butler Review of the use of intelligence in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Named after its chairman, Robin Butler, Baron Butler of Brockwell—a pillar of the establishment who served as private secretary to five prime ministers, including Thatcher and Blair—the Butler report, published in 2004, refused to hold Blair or anyone else accountable for the lies used to justify the war.

Throughout his career, Chilcot served as a top official

in various Labour and Conservative governments in the Home Office, Civil Service Department and the Cabinet Office. He was private secretary to Home Secretaries Roy Jenkins (Labour), Merlyn Rees (Labour) and William Whitelaw (Conservative). Chilcot is now the president of The Police Foundation, a policing think tank.

Earlier this month Chilcot gave evidence at Parliament's Liaison Committee and told them that Blair went "beyond the facts" in order to justify the war. Translated into plain English, Blair lied, as Chilcot and everyone knows. However, Blair, a widely despised, unindicted war criminal, remains free and is now in the process of establishing an office in London and returning to front-line politics. That this is the case is due to the now proven fact that the ruling elite ensured that none of those responsible for the Iraq war would face justice.

Just a few months after Chilcot's report was issued, its 2.6 million words, in 13 volumes, are now gathering dust in the House of Commons library. It has served its purpose for the ruling elite, who always intended it as the basis for finally washing their hands of the Iraq War. Following the publication of Chilcot's report earlier this year, only around 50 MPs, out of 650, even showed up to debate it in Parliament. Their main concern was that, whatever the consequences of Iraq, it would be wrong to use the criticisms to oppose further wars involving Britain's military.

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