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Comment

It's official - Saddam was not an imminent threat

Hutton's remit was narrow - yet he has exposed the truth about the Iraq war

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Saturday August 23, 2003
[The Guardian](#)

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After eight days of the Hutton inquiry and enormous quantities of media coverage, it is worth pausing to try to take stock. Many of us have said that, deliberately or otherwise, Alastair Campbell's decision to go to war with the BBC had the potential to distract attention from the most important questions arising from the Iraq crisis - whether the nation was deceived on the road to war, and where responsibility lies for the continuing chaos and loss of life in Iraq.

Lord Hutton has been charged with inquiring into the narrower question of the circumstances that led to the death of Dr David Kelly and will report on this very important question. But his inquiry is revealing important information that casts light on the bigger question of how we got to war.

There is an unfortunate tendency among some commentators to seek to narrow the issue to a blame game between the BBC and 10 Downing Street. This has led to comment to the effect that Dr Kelly was the unfortunate victim of a battle between two mighty institutions, accompanied by a campaign of vilification against Andrew Gilligan and the Today programme. It is important to remain constantly aware of the vested interests at play: the Murdoch empire and other rightwing media operations would like to weaken and break the BBC so that British

broadcasting might be reduced to the sort of commercially dominated, biased news reporting that controls the US airwaves. It is extremely unfortunate that a Labour government has been willing to drive forward this campaign against the BBC.

We must not allow the barrage of biased comment to mislead us into a fudged conclusion that it was six of one and half a dozen of the other. And we must focus both on the pressures that were placed on Dr Kelly and the wider question of how we got to war in Iraq.

The inquiry has already established beyond doubt that, despite government briefing that Dr Kelly was a medium-level official of little significance, he was in fact one of the world's leading experts on WMD in Iraq. It is also clear that Dr Kelly chose to brief three BBC journalists - and presumably others - to the effect that the 45-minute warning of the possible use of WMD was an exaggeration. He said to the Newsnight reporter Susan Watts, as well as to Gilligan that Campbell and the Downing Street press operation were responsible for exerting pressure to hype up the danger. The inquiry is exploring the reality of that claim. But it is already clear that Dr Kelly made it, to Gilligan and Watts.

The BBC would have been grossly irresponsible if it had failed to bring such a report - from such an eminent source - to public attention. It is a delicious irony that Alastair Campbell castigates the BBC for relying on one very eminent source for this report ... and yet the 45-minute claim itself came from only one source.

As a result of the Hutton inquiry, we now know that two defence intelligence officials wrote to their boss to put on record their disquiet at the exaggeration in the dossier. Moreover, one official asked his boss for advice as to whether he should approach the foreign affairs select committee after the foreign secretary had said that he was not aware of any unhappiness among intelligence officials about the claims made in the dossier.

We know through emails revealed by Hutton that Tony Blair's chief of staff made clear that the dossier was likely to convince those who were prepared to be convinced, but that the document "does nothing to demonstrate he [Saddam Hussein] has the motive to attack his neighbours, let alone the west. We will need to be clear in launching the document that we do not claim that we have evidence that he is an imminent threat. The case we are making is that he has continued to develop WMD since 1998, and is in breach of UN resolutions. The international

community has to enforce those resolutions if the UN is to be taken seriously."

I agree completely with Jonathan Powell's conclusion. But it follows from this that there was no need to truncate Dr Blix's inspection process and to divide the security council in order to get to war by a preordained date.

If there was no imminent threat, then Dr Blix could have been given the time he required. He may well have succeeded in ending all Iraq's WMD programmes - just as he succeeded in dismantling 60-plus ballistic missiles. Then sanctions could have been lifted and a concentrated effort made to help the people of Iraq end the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein - just as we did with Milosevic in Serbia.

Or if Blix had failed, we would have been in the position President Chirac described on March 10, when the issue would have come back to the security council. And in Chirac's view, this would have meant UN authorisation of military action.

The tragedy of all this is that if we had followed Jonathan Powell's conclusion, and the UK had used its friendship with the US to keep the world united on a UN route, then, even if it had come to war, a united international community under a UN mandate would almost certainly have made a better job of supporting Iraq's reconstruction. In this scenario the armed forces would have concentrated on keeping order; the UN humanitarian system would have fixed the water and electricity systems; Sergio Vieira de Mello, as Kofi Annan's special representative, would have helped the Iraqis to install an interim government and begin a process of constitutional change, as the UN has done in Afghanistan; and the World Bank and IMF would have advised the Iraqi interim authority on transparent economic reform, rather than a process of handover to US companies.

Following the terrible bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad, there is a danger that those who favour chaos in Iraq will make further gains, at great cost to the people of Iraq and coalition forces. The answer remains a stronger UN mandate and internationalisation of the reconstruction effort. The worry is that the US will not have the humility to ask for help, and the chaos and suffering will continue.

In the meantime, Lord Hutton will draw his conclusions about the tragic death of Dr Kelly. My own tentative conclusion is that Downing Street thought they could use him in their battle with

the BBC, and that the power of the state was misused in a battle to protect the political interests of the government.

• Clare Short resigned as international development secretary in May

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