

Not Fit To Be Prime Minister?

On the 29th September 2004, Tony Blair gave an interview to John Humphrys on the BBC Radio 4 morning programme Today. This was very revealing, and it deserves to be borne in mind when evaluating the decision to launch a war, and the consequences of that decision.

Whilst the interview itself is lucid, there are a number of issues which arise out of the Prime Minister's statements. Of course, new evidence continues to appear. But John Humphrys' questions were entirely pertinent, and he succeeded in going to the heart of the matter.

This text was transcribed by Tony Simpson.

* * *

We should refresh our memories about the true costs of this war; which is now presented as the righteous overthrow of Saddam Hussein. But it was far more than a passive coup d'état. This illegal war had disastrous consequences for Iraqi civilians, some one hundred thousand of whom have been killed. 'It is estimated that ninety-eight thousand more deaths than expected happened after the invasion, outside of Falluja, and far more if the Falluja cluster is included', reported The Lancet in their comprehensive survey of civilian mortality in Iraq.¹

The Lancet made extremely careful estimates of the death toll, and if anything, the numbers they have recorded will prove to have been underestimates. This death toll does not include the figures of military casualties. The coalition, contrary to the Geneva Conventions, did not record the numbers of dead and wounded among the Iraqi military, leave alone civilian deaths, although, of course, such numbers were recorded where they involved soldiers of the coalition itself. Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention says that civilians 'shall at all times be humanely treated, and shall be protected especially against acts of violence'. But The Lancet estimate states that more than half the civilian deaths caused by the occupying forces were woman and children.

It is arguable that the reduction of Falluja constituted a war crime, in which the American forces were abetted by Britain which made special deployments from the Black Watch in order to provide cover for the Americans.

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It is in this horrific context that we should now judge the arcane arguments about weapons of mass destruction, which the world now knows never existed. There follows the text of the Humphrys' radio interview.

Interview

John Humphrys/Tony Blair, The Today Programme, 29.9.2004

JH: *If Tony Blair now accepted that there were no weapons of mass destruction, why didn't he accept that we had been taken to war on a false prospectus?*

TB: The difficulty I have is this. I can apologise for the fact that the information we gave has turned out to be wrong. I've maintained very strongly that it was given in good faith, and shared by most other people. The trouble is, I can't apologise for saying that we got rid of Saddam Hussein, or that the basis on which we went to war was wrong, because we took the action as a result of Saddam's failure to comply with UN resolutions. That non-compliance still stands.

JH: *We did not go to war, or we were not told we were going to war, to get rid of Saddam Hussein.*

TB: That's absolutely right. Regime change was not the cause for it. The cause for it was that — what I did was take the view after September 11 that we had to take a totally new approach. And what that meant is that in respect of regimes developing weapons of mass destruction, instead of taking a reactive approach, we had to take an active approach. Therefore, the place to start was Iraq, because there was a string of UN resolutions, a long history of UN inspections not working, and so we went back to the United Nations, got a fresh resolution, which said that he had to comply fully with the UN inspection regime. Now, in the end, he didn't, so that was the legal basis for the war. The regime, as I think I said, actually, before the war began, the regime was not irrelevant because, of course, the possibility of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of a malign regime is different from that if they're in the hands of a benign regime ...

JH: *You were very clear when you said I've never put the justification for action as regime change.*

TB: Yes, absolutely.

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JH: *But in the end that's what happened.*

TB: What happened was we got rid of the regime, because that was the only way that ...

JH: *A regime that was not threatening us.*

TB: Well, I don't accept that. I don't accept that they weren't a threat, because the issue was, were they in compliance with UN resolutions?

JH: *Was that the issue, or were they a threat? Because when you told us that you wanted to go to war in Iraq, you did so because they were a threat to us. That surely can be the only reason why a Prime Minister takes a country to war?*

TB: Of course, but the nature of the threat was that, because of the UN resolutions that had been passed in respect of Iraq, which we then got renewed in the resolution in November 2002, and that resolution said that Saddam had to comply fully and unconditionally with the UN inspectors. He wasn't doing so. So in the end we were faced with a situation. Let's be clear, the only reason the UN inspectors were back in Iraq at all was because we had 200,000 American and British troops down there. Now, we couldn't leave them there forever, so we had to come to a point. We did so in November 2002. The resolution was passed saying he had to comply fully, unconditionally, completely, and he didn't.

JH: *It wasn't a resolution, according to the Secretary General of the United Nations and the Security Council, that justified war. In the view of the Secretary General the war was not legal. He made that very clear last month.*

TB: That is his view. It's not our view.

JH: *It's the view of the man who runs the only legal organisation that we have of its kind to which we subscribe.*

TB: I'm afraid we took the view, we took it at the time, we take it now,

that the war was justified legally because he remained in breach of the UN resolutions. The issue, I think, I haven't in fact studied the actual words that Kofi used, but I think the issue he was talking about was whether the resolution 1441 — we can go back into the detail — was such that it would actually justify action if there was a breach of it. I don't think he or anybody else is disputing that there was, indeed, a breach of resolution 1441.

JH: 'I have made it clear that it was not in conformity, the decision to go to war, with the Security Council, with the UN Charter.' 'It was illegal?' 'Yes, it was illegal.' That's what he said.

TB: I totally understand that, and I'm not disputing it. I'm simply saying that we don't accept that. We believe it was, and the reason we believe it was, is that we believe if there was a breach of resolution 1441, then we were justified in taking military action.

JH: What you said yesterday was that you apologised for the information, the intelligence information you had, being wrong. What puzzles many people about that is that you seem to have accepted that information in a very naïve, in fact gullible, way, and the reason for that, and people like Robin Cook suggest this, don't they, is that you had already decided with President Bush that you would go to war? So you were not looking for information that would prove the case for war. You were looking for information that would justify a decision you had already reached.

TB: I entirely agree that's what people say. Now let me deal with the two aspects of it. The first is that, somehow, this information really wasn't of any importance at all. The fact is, as I indicated when I spoke to the House of Commons, and actually went through, not the so-called 'Dossier', but went through the intelligence itself. There was no doubt in respect of the intelligence about Saddam and weapons of mass destruction. That was absolutely clear. So it wasn't a question of being naïve or gullible. The intelligence we had was intelligence I believe that any sensible, reasonable Prime Minister would say 'That's clear evidence there is a WMD threat here.' In respect of the second part, it simply is not correct. Let me just tell you something. When we

first had the discussions about this, myself and President Bush, in the course of 2002, our case was this is an issue we have to deal with post 9/11. Of course, it never was the case that Saddam was about to launch an attack on Britain or the United States, but we had to go back and start enforcing the UN resolutions in respect of weapons of mass destruction, and take a completely different stand. Why? Because of our fear that if terrorists ever got hold of these weapons, the destruction they would wreak would be massive and devastating in the consequences of them. When we then decided to go back to the United Nations, had Saddam complied fully with the UN resolution, there wouldn't have been a conflict. It may well be a good idea, and it is a good idea, that Saddam is out of power, but the fact is that at the time, we accepted fully the justification was his failure to comply with UN resolutions. Now, we believe, and I believe now, I think it's the reason why it has passed virtually without comment, that a couple of weeks ago Libya finally wound up its weapons of mass destruction programme. America's lifted sanctions. We've got a better chance of getting Iran and North Korea into compliance than we have ever had. I thought, and I still think, that it was absolutely essential that we took that stand.

***JH:** Let me come back to that. You say that there was no doubt about that evidence. There was doubt. There was considerable doubt about it. I spoke myself, and others did too, to very senior figures in intelligence who said, and I quote on the basis of one particular conversation, on any Cartesian analysis 'Iraq does not emerge as the priority. There were other priorities: Syria and Iran, perhaps.'* There were questions about the 45 minute warning.

TB: John, could I just interrupt you a minute there? I think it's very important to realise why it is we went in respect of Iraq, first. The reason was – I'm not saying there aren't weapons of mass destruction issues about Iran or North Korea, for example. There certainly are. But the reason we went to Iraq, the reason I thought it was right to start with Iraq in respect of this issue, was the long history of the country that had actually used weapons of mass destruction, that had then, for four years in the early 1990s, you'd had inspectors in Iraq not finding weapons of mass destruction.

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JH: *Yes, but they weren't regarded as a threat. That's the point. The 45 minute threat, in particular, which you appeared to be unaware of, that is to say you were confused as to whether it was battlefield or longer-range weapons, baffled many people. Why didn't you ask the questions? Unless you were so keen, so enthusiastic about going to war because George Bush wanted you to go to war, why did you not ask the sorts of questions that would have revealed the information you needed to say 'Hang on a minute. Maybe this isn't the right thing to do'?*

TB: First of all, the information that he was still intent on developing weapons of mass destruction and had actually readily deployable weapons, that was nothing to do with the 45 minutes. There was a mass of evidence to that effect, a mass of intelligence. The intelligence about strategic ...

JH: *Not accepted by Russia, by Germany, not accepted by France. You say accepted by everybody. Not by everybody.*

TB: Sorry, John. That isn't right. The resolution that was passed in the United Nations Security Council was a resolution that accepted that he was a weapons of mass destruction threat. The issue with France, Germany and Russia was that they thought there was a different way of dealing with it.

JH: *No, it wasn't that. 'Russia does not have in its possession any trustworthy data that would support the existence of nuclear weapons or any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.' President Putin.*

TB: The weapons of mass destruction issue that was dealt with in resolution 1441, the whole of the international community accepted that this threat existed. That's why they called upon him to comply fully with the inspectors. Now let me go back to this issue ... I think it's important. It's part of the ... OK, in the end with this thing, I totally understand why people have a very strong view. You're entitled to have a view. Everyone's entitled to have a view. Just understand why I took this decision. I took the decision, as I said yesterday, I'm as fallible as anyone else. I may be wrong in it. But I don't believe I'm wrong.

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JH: *If your judgement is wrong on this, if it really is wrong on this — let me put this very bluntly — you wouldn't be fit to be Prime Minister, because you got wrong a profoundly important, the most important, decision ...*

TB: In the end, all you can do as Prime Minister is to say this is why I have taken this judgement. My judgement, post September 11, is that we face a completely new security threat. I really believe this. I believe it passionately. If we don't deal with this threat, then at some point in time, in the future, it is going to engulf us. There are different aspects of that. One aspect was dealing with regimes developing weapons of mass destruction that could fall into the hands of these terrorists. That is why we dealt with the issue of Iraq in UN resolutions. We could have dealt with it in a different way. We could have, for example, had Saddam complied. We could have dealt with that in a different way in respect of Iraq. We are dealing in a different way with Iran, with Libya, with North Korea.

JH: *Let me put this to you. What you did yesterday in your speech was set up two false opposites. You said there are two kinds of people, only two approaches. One approach is, say, we try not to provoke them. There are people who believe, just isolated individuals, extremists engaged in isolated acts of terrorism. They say 'Don't provoke them. Hope in time they will wither'. That is one group. I confess I haven't met that group, but you say there is that group. The other group, the other alternative — and there is no third way, you said — is to remove them, root and branch. But the point is there was, and is still, and there always is in these things, a third way. And in the case of Iraq, the third way was to carry on doing what we were doing, which was containment. What we've done instead, in your own words, is we have turned Iraq into a crucible of world terror. And you say the world is a safer place. Colin Powell himself tells us the world is not a safer place. There is more terrorism, not less.*

TB: Let's deal with this argument as well. You've been containing Saddam on and off for years. Why not just ... It's an important argument. Why not say ... It's important people hear from me why I don't think this argument is correct. I agree there was some success for the policy of containment in respect of weapons of mass destruction.

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JH: *Total. There were no weapons of mass destruction.*

TB: The fact of the matter is we took bombing action actually at the end of 1998, and Robin Cook was Foreign Secretary... We had 2,000 British troops down there the whole time. No-fly-zones, sanctions, the question was...

JH: *And it was working.*

TB: Was it working?

JH: *Yes. We know it was because there were no weapons of mass destruction.*

TB: I don't know that we know that, actually.

JH: *I thought that was what you apologised for yesterday.*

TB: No. Because the issue is, was he prepared then to comply with UN resolutions? That's what I keep saying to you.

JH: *The issue is whether he was a threat to us.*

TB: And the question of whether he was a threat was whether he retained the capability and intent to develop weapons of mass destruction, I agree. Also, there's the issue of whether he had actual, readily deployable weapons. But the point that I'm making to you is, I don't accept that containment in respect of Saddam was working, and more than that, because I have taken this view that, after September 11, we've got to take a wholly different and more active approach to these issues, then containment of some sort or other is not sufficient to deal with this. We've got to go out and deal with it properly. As for the fact that Iraq is difficult today, of course it's difficult. But these are people who are there in Iraq trying to kill anybody, whether they're aid workers, Iraqi civilians, Iraqi people who want to join the police ...

JH: *British soldiers.*

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TB: Exactly, British soldiers. Why are they doing it? They're doing it ...That's the question. That's why I say to you there are two views. What you say is, these people, if we hadn't given them the excuse, if we simply left them alone, there wouldn't be a problem. I don't agree with you. I profoundly disagree with you.

JH: If it happens again, and this gets right down to the question of trust, and you've acknowledged that you have lost trust as a result of this. You said yesterday that the nation was divided over it, which clearly it is. If another situation like this arises, God forbid, and you have to go to the House of Commons and say 'There is this country that is threatening us, and it is developing weapons of mass destruction', isn't the truth that people would laugh at you. You simply couldn't do it.

TB: It depends what the evidence is.

JH: Does it? They'll say 'Hang on, we heard this before. And he had to tell us the intelligence was wrong, and he apologised'.

TB: There's no point in hypothesizing.

JH: This gets to the heart of the Prime Minister's responsibilities.

TB: It does. I agree. But let's just get to the heart of it. I've taken this decision. On the basis I'm not naïve about politics, it's a decision, let's say, in terms of popular support that has not done me a great deal of good. I think we'd both accept that. And sometimes when people talk about this issue of trust, the time to trust a politician most is actually when they're courting popularity least, because then they're doing something that, whatever the political price they're going to pay for it, they actually believe in. I keep saying to people I don't disrespect people who take another point of view. There is another point of view.

JH: Let's not go down that road...

TB: It's important in relation to the issue of trust. What it comes down to in the end is, am I doing this because I believe in it? ...

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JH: *No, it doesn't. What you believe in doesn't much matter, with great respect, in the sense that what matters is whether the people of this country would trust you to take them to war again. And if they would not trust you to take them to war again, you can't be Prime Minister, can you?*

TB: I'm afraid I don't accept that people won't trust a judgement that is made provided the evidence is given to them, and, of course, it's absolutely right the evidence given to them has got to be credible...

JH: *We had the evidence last time, and it was wrong.*

YB: There's no use in hypothesizing about what any future situation may bring. Of course, if it's a question of a country and weapons of mass destruction, never mind the rest of the country, I'm going to want to make sure that every single piece of evidence we assemble is right ...

JH: *Didn't happen last time.*

TB: We did. The intelligence we got was very clear ... and it was in respect of a country that had actually used weapons of mass destruction. It's not as if, when I went to the House in 2002, that we were talking about a country that had no history of weapons of mass destruction. We had inspectors in there with the wool pulled over their eyes ...

JH: *Given what we know now, and what we knew then, you could actually see yourself standing in the House of Commons saying we have a dossier which proves x, y and z. The response to that would be, Prime Minister, people would be dismissive of you, wouldn't they?*

TB: We don't have such a situation. But the circumstances of it, of course, in the light of what has happened, people will want to know that any evidence that is given is very soundly based. But that's not the case at the moment, is it?

* * *

Some questions still unresolved

Books have been written about the complex issues which have arisen from this terrible war. John Humphreys in the interview reported above deals with the issues admirably. But there are a few questions which deserve our commentary.

First, was the false information given out during the Prime Minister's advocacy of war 'given in good faith'? There is overwhelming evidence that it was not.² The latest and most comprehensive evidence from the United States comes from a Presidential Commission examining pre-war intelligence failures. A key source of this 'intelligence' was 'an alcoholic cousin of an aide to Ahmed Chalabi', who was held in contempt by his American handlers. They described him as 'crazy'. His own friends called him 'a congenital liar'. This defector is known by the code name Curveball, and Curveball is being held responsible for the comprehensive corruption of American intelligence estimates on Iraq.

'Of all the disproven pre-war weapons claims from aluminium centrifuge tubes to yellowcake uranium from Niger, none points to greater levels of incompetence than those found within the misadventures of Curveball.'

None of the Americans had direct access to Curveball, whose reports came to them through German intelligence. But the Germans were profoundly suspicious of them. Between January 2000 and September 2001, Curveball submitted one hundred reports, including those on the claim of mobile biological weapons labs that were central to the claim of an illicit weapons programme, but turned out in fact to be trucks equipped with machinery to inflate weather balloons.

The Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction reported that Curveball's information was worse than none at all. 'Worse than having no human sources' it said, 'is being seduced by a human source who is telling lies.'

Second, Tony Blair insists that 'We took the action as a result of Saddam's failure to comply with UN resolutions'. What hard evidence is there for such non-compliance? Mr. Blair says that, 'In respect of regimes developing WMD, instead of taking a reactive approach, we had to take an active approach'. Britain itself has a large arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. Who has appointed Britain, or for that matter, the United States, as custodian of world decisions on armaments?

Mr. Blair bases the legitimacy of this interventionism upon the attacks on Washington and New York on September 11th 2001. But Iraq had nothing whatever to do with these attacks. It is not even proven that the authorities in

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Afghanistan were associated with them. What is clear is that they were criminal attacks, and needed to be dealt with under the criminal law, which, if necessary, needed to be amended to be able to cover such events. If no States were involved in the attacks, then there was no legitimacy for counterattacks on States.

Since it is now beyond doubt that Iraq held no WMD stocks, the existence of 'a string of UN resolutions' takes on a different aspect, since many of them were clearly grounded on false intelligence. Be that as it may, it is untrue to say that the Iraqi regime did not comply in full with Resolution 1441 of the Security Council. The Iraqis submitted a 12,000 page Declaration in response to the demands of Resolution 1441, which has never been published, and has been withheld from all but the five Permanent Members of the Security Council.³ But it was addressed to the Council as a whole, and there is no excuse for censoring. Mr. Blair is therefore secure in the knowledge that the evidence on this matter is not available to a critical public.

Thirdly, Mr. Blair denies that the United Nations Secretary General is qualified to pronounce the war illegal. Specifically, he insists that, 'We believe if there was a breach of Resolution 1441 then we were justified in taking military action'. A long and noisy argument has skirted this issue, because it is assumed by many that this was the argument offered by the British Attorney General to justify war, at the end of a long process of equivocation. But the argument will not stand up for a moment. In fact, Resolution 1441 was accompanied by a formal statement by Ambassador Greenstock to the Security Council in an Explanation of Vote on the 8th November 2002:

'We heard loud and clear during the negotiation the concerns about 'automaticity' and 'hidden triggers' – the concern that on a decision so crucial we should not rush into military action; that on a decision so crucial any Iraqi violations should be discussed by the Council. Let me be equally clear in response, as a co-sponsor with the United States of the text we have adopted. There is no 'automaticity' in this Resolution. If there is a further Iraqi breach of its disarmament obligations, the matter will return to the Council for discussion as required in Operational Paragraph 12. We would expect the Security Council then to meet its responsibilities.'

The Security Council did meet, of course, but the Resolution favoured by Britain and the United States was withdrawn, since it was perfectly clear that if it went to the vote it would be thrown out. The new Resolution was not vetoed, because it was never tabled, and so there was no decision about what the responsibilities entailed might be.

This is the context in which Kofi Annan was later to insist that the decision

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to go to war by a tiny minority of Security Council members 'was not in conformity with the UN Charter ... from the Charter point of view, it was illegal'.

Fourthly, Mr. Blair is still claiming that Iraq breached Resolution 1441. What breaches occurred? At the beginning of 2002, the Prime Minister insisted that Iraq had stockpiles 'of major amounts of chemical and biological weapons'. But the Joint Intelligence Committee in Britain was claiming that Iraq 'may have hidden small quantities of agents and weapons'. The Prime Minister claimed that 'Saddam Hussein poses a severe threat not just to the region, but to the wider world' and that he had sufficient chemical and biological weapons remaining to 'devastate the entire Gulf region'. But British intelligence estimated that 'Saddam has not succeeded in seriously threatening his neighbours'. These and other false allegations were accompanied by the claim that the Prime Minister had seen intelligence which was 'extensive, detailed and authoritative'. But the Chief of MI6 had in fact insisted to him that key sources should be treated with caution.

Every day brings new confessions by different parts of the intelligence community⁴ about how their judgment on weapons of mass destruction has been at fault. If Tony Blair had not invested so much moral capital in buttressing these false claims, he might not deserve such strong criticism. Much of the untruth in the Government's case for war can be traced to the false information systematically fed to the Americans by Curveball. British intelligence apparently retailed this information: some treated it as if it were Gospel truth. Thus it became the Gospel according to Saint Tony, the most comprehensive farrago, which has slaughtered so many Iraqi children, and killed so many other innocents.

Footnotes:

- 1 We published a summary of this evidence in The Spokesman, in the number entitled Falluja: Shock and Awe (number 84, 2004).*
- 2 See for instance: www.impeachBlair.org A Case to Answer, published by Spokesman Books, 2004.*
- 3 A severely truncated version of the Declaration was circulated to the ten Non-Permanent Members of the Security Council. The censoring and suppression of Iraq's Declaration is recorded in Empire No More! (pages 187-199) by Ken Coates (Spokesman Books, 2004). See also Dark Times: Torture (The Spokesman no.81, 2004, pages 77-87).*
- 4 Cf The Times, 8th April 2005: American chiefs admit Iraq's mistakes.*

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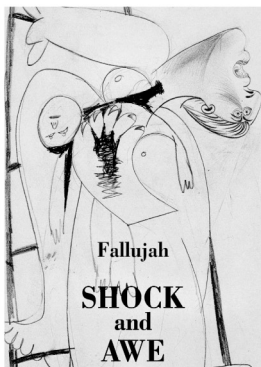
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Fraud at the Elections

The final and definitive Judgment of Election Commissioner Richard Mawrey QC handed down on Monday 4th April 2005 in the matters of Local Government elections for the Bordesley Green and Aston Wards of the Birmingham City Council both held on 10th June 2004.

Commissioner Mawrey concludes his masterly Judgment with this warning:

‘Until very recently, no-one has treated electoral fraud as representing a problem. Apart from the Electoral Commission, whose role I have described above, the only voices raised against the laxity of the system have been in the media, in particular *The Times* newspaper, and the tendency of politicians of all Parties has been to dismiss these warnings as scaremongering. In the course of preparing my judgment, my attention was drawn to what I am told is an official Government statement about postal voting which I hope I quote correctly:

“There are no proposals to change the rules governing election procedures for the next election, including those for postal voting. The systems already in place to deal with the allegations of electoral fraud are clearly working.”

Anybody who has sat through the case I have just tried and listened to evidence of electoral fraud that would disgrace a banana republic would find this statement surprising. To assert that “The systems already in place to deal with the allegations of electoral fraud are clearly working” indicates a state not simply of complacency but of denial. The systems to deal with fraud are not working well. They are not working badly. The fact is that there are no systems to deal realistically with fraud and there never have been. Until there are, fraud will continue unabated.’

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