

Iraq's Report X

Brian Jones

Dr Jones was head of the UK Defence Intelligence Staff's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons section in the build up to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Since 2003, he has maintained a constant flow of objective comment on the use and misuse of intelligence during that period. For anyone seeking a reliable guide through this labyrinth, his book, Failing Intelligence, is the best place to start.

Evidence released earlier this year by Sir John Chilcot's Iraq Inquiry reinforces the suspicion I first raised publicly in 2004 that Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS) analysts, and probably some members of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) (and hence the wider audience – cabinet, parliament, public) were deceived into believing that the evidence of Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was stronger than it actually was.

To recap: throughout the drafting of the September 2002 dossier, DIS analysts argued that the assessment of Iraq's WMD status and capability was being expressed in terms that were not warranted by the available intelligence. The DIS representatives at the final drafting meeting refused to endorse the assessment and clear the dossier. In an attempt to persuade them, they were told a recently received intelligence report from MI6, which could not be released to them, overcame their reservations about whether Iraq actually possessed any chemical and biological weapons. (For convenience, I have previously referred to this intelligence as Report X and will continue to do so here). They rightly said they could not change the DIS position under such circumstances. As a result, after the meeting a representative of MI6, which had been at the drafting meeting, spoke with a senior manager in the DIS about the new intelligence and this led to the Chief of Defence Intelligence, on the advice of his Deputy, approving the draft of the dossier without further reference to his analysts.

The 2004 Butler Review said it was presented with no 'evidence that persuaded the committee that there was an insuperable

obstacle to allowing analysts access to the intelligence' (page 139, para 577) and 'it was wrong that a report which was of significance in the drafting of a document of the importance of the dossier was not shown to key experts in the DIS who could have commented on the validity and credibility of the report' (page 111, para 452). The decision meant it 'was not seen by the few people in the UK intelligence community able to form an all-round, professional technical judgement on its reliability and significance' (page 138, para 575). Butler also noted that it was known at the outset that the intelligence on which Report X was based came from a source without a proven record of reliability. Sir Richard Dearlove, the Head of MI6 at the time, has insisted that he made this clear to those he spoke to about it, including Prime Minister Blair, his foreign policy adviser, Sir David Manning, his chief of staff Jonathan Powell, his head of communications Alastair Campbell and John Scarlett, Chairman of the JIC. In other words, Butler believed those who did see Report X were not properly qualified to analyse it and those who decided that it was necessary to exclude the expert analysts made an error of judgement.

Butler revealed that Report X indicated 'the production of biological and chemical agent had been accelerated by the Iraqi Government, including through the building of further facilities throughout Iraq' (page 138, para 573). Despite the fact that it was later withdrawn and discredited, the content of Report X remains a matter of the highest importance. The Butler review said Report X had provided 'significant assurance to those drafting the Government's dossier that active, current production of chemical and biological agent was taking place' (page 100, para 405) and 'The fact that it was not shown to ... [Brian Jones and colleagues] resulted in a stronger assessment in the dossier in relation to Iraqi chemical weapons production than was justified by the available intelligence' (page 139, para 577). The implication is that those concerned recognised that the WMD assessment was unsustainable without the degree of certainty added by Report X if it proved to be right. This means it was a key element in the dossier, which would become the most comprehensive written declaration of the government's case for war.

Unfortunately, for reasons that require explanation, Butler avoided offering an opinion on whether those who had seen Report X were justified in believing it to be valid and credible and justified overruling the assessment of the DIS expert analysts and modifying the previous JIC position. Despite calls in the House of Commons in 2004 for the report to be released, it never has been. Seven years on, the transcripts of the private interviews are taking us beyond what was revealed by Butler. They suggest

that Report X fell well short of providing the convincing evidence about Iraq's WMD which would have been necessary to dismiss the analysts' concerns. What they have said reinforces the suspicion I had at the time that an inconclusive intelligence report was being used incompetently or dishonestly to finesse the DIS objections.

The most important information comes from private interviews with a number of senior members of the MI6 (Secret Intelligence Service) who were involved in 2001-3 and are identified by the assignment of SIS numbers rather than names, and with their boss, Sir Richard Dearlove. Some revelations were also made by the Inquiry committee during the course of their questioning. Despite being heavily redacted, the transcripts are none the less revealing .

Dearlove believed that the intelligence in Report X placed them 'on the edge of a significant breakthrough' (see SIS4 transcript 1, page 56). Several of his officers appeared to suggest the intelligence was non-specific and believed when the dossier was published a breakthrough was still needed on, for example, the location of agent production facilities. It was hoped the new source would provide more specific information which would allow analysts to cross-check the data and reach a more confident and convincing assessment that Iraq possessed chemical and biological weapons. It was described by SIS1 (p18) as 'wishful thinking' that the source would come good on his promise to provide the 'crock of gold at the end of the rainbow'. However, none of the MI6 witnesses, or those questioning them, directly linked Report X to the dossier that was being produced at this time (unless that was buried in the redactions).

Report X was issued on 11 September 2002 and, at the suggestion of Manning, it was briefed by Dearlove to the Prime Minister during a meeting on 12 September. Blair has never acknowledged the significance of Report X. When asked by the Iraq Inquiry about the 12 September meeting, he spoke of the impact on him of new intelligence of mobile production facilities for biological weapons rather than recalling anything about the sensitive source of Report X. However, during questioning of two other MI6 witnesses, a member of the Inquiry appeared to suggest to one of them that it had evidence that both the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary displayed particular interest in this intelligence, especially whether the promised 'silver bullet' had materialised or when it might be expected (see SIS 4 transcript 1, page 58). SIS1 (page 60) revealed that the Prime Minister had mentioned it to him as late as January 2003. At the Hutton Inquiry, Alastair Campbell's recollection of the 12 September meeting gave prominence to the Report X intelligence and attributed to Dearlove the

notion that it could not be used in the dossier directly but might be used 'through assertion'. Campbell said Dearlove told them this was because of the sensitivity of the source, however, there must now be suspicion that the real reason was because of the uncertain nature of the information. Whichever it was, the absence of information that eliminated doubt, and the requirement for the 'silver bullet' remains evident. It is to be hoped the Inquiry will clarify what was discussed at that 12 September 2002 meeting and its importance to the stated confidence in the assessed status of Iraq's WMD capability that appeared in the dossier (including its Foreword).

When the source was seen again and a second report issued towards the end of September (Report Y, perhaps) the information fell far short of being the 'silver bullet' needed. This may have been what led to the change from the unqualified judgement in the dossier of 24 September that 'Iraq has continued to produce chemical and biological agents', to a JIC assessment on 28 October which said 'intelligence *indicates* that [Iraq] has continued to produce chemical agent' (Butler page 88, paragraph 346) and 'intelligence *indicates* it has continued to produce biological agents' (Butler page 88, paragraph 348) [my italics]. For an experienced JIC reader, the use of the word 'indicates' weakens the judgement considerably. Report Y must have remained firmly in its compartment of limited readership during the period at least up to my retirement in January 2003 and, I suspect, until after the war. No explanation for the modification of the assessment between 24 September and 28 October was volunteered at the time to DIS analysts by CDI or his Deputy. For my part, in October/November 2002 I recall that I was pleased that a normal JIC assessment had more closely reflected our analysis.

Beyond the protection of the incompetent or the guilty, there can be few reasons now why suitably redacted versions of Reports X, Y, and a report ('Z'), which apparently summarised them and was given a wider distribution in about April 2003, cannot be made available for public scrutiny. The critical information they contain has become historic. Its source appears to have misled us into a damaging war with many deaths and can deserve little further consideration or protection. Any remaining risk should be balanced against the need to resolve a matter that continues to undermine the confidence of the British public in intelligence, politicians and officials. If the Inquiry cannot disclose a redacted but substantial version of the reports, it should make much clearer and complete statements on this issue than its predecessors have. And parliament must satisfy itself that the national interest has been served by what has been revealed.

The failure of four inquiries to deal with this issue suggests that those

concerned who saw Report X or were briefed about it in September 2002 have repeatedly failed to reveal important information over many inquiries and years. The previous inquiries have either failed to uncover the full truth or decided not to reveal it to Parliament or the public at large. It is important that the current inquiry examines and explains why these details have not emerged in a more timely fashion.

Whilst the detail relating to the intelligence is mainly about the behaviour of officials, what happened does raise the question of the diligence of Blair and other ministers in reading intelligence reports, JIC assessments and the draft dossier with an appropriately critical eye. The information contained in them did not indicate certainty about Iraq's WMD. If Blair gained his confidence by attaching greater weight to verbal briefings by individuals and small groups rather than carefully prepared documentary briefs and reports then Chilcot should make that clear. The Inquiry should make explicit judgements on whether ministerial and/or civil service codes of conduct have been breached.

Editor's note: The Chilcot Inquiry seems to have entered a long hibernation. Nothing has appeared on its website since July 2011, and newspaper stories suggest its report might be delayed until summer 2012. By contrast, Iraqi Inquiry Digest maintains a steady flow of informative and probing commentary online, including from Dr Jones.

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Michael D. Higgins President of Ireland

Roger Cole, Chair of Ireland's Peace and Neutrality Alliance (PANA) said:

'PANA welcomes the election of Michael D. Higgins as President of Ireland. Michael D. Higgins consistently opposed the use of Shannon Airport by US troops in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and has called for the withdrawal of Irish troops from Afghanistan. These have been key demands of the Irish peace movement since 2001. The Irish Constitution commits us to the peaceful resolution of international disputes and we would hope that his election symbolises the restoration of the values of Irish Independence, democracy and neutrality, and the rejection of the neo-liberal militarist ideology that has dominated our political élite for so long.'

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