

Blair's Impeachment

Alex Salmond MP

Alex Salmond is the leader of the Scottish National Party. He joined with MPs from other parties in moves to impeach Prime Minister Blair. Here he outlines the background to those moves.

As Tony Blair freeloaded his way around Europe over the summer of 2004, two noted academics prepared a devastating report* for a cross-party group of MPs. This report not only details the Prime Minister's misdemeanours over Iraq but also points to a parliamentary mechanism that could have finally held him to account over the abuse of his office in launching the war.

This is not the whitewash of a Hutton or the establishment report of a Butler. This is the painstaking, forensic examination of academics – Glen Rangwala and Dan Plesch – who examine the detailed and growing public record and then find the Prime Minister guilty of repeated breaches of his responsibilities of office.

The reports by Lords Hutton and Butler did at least contain evidence which shone new light into the recesses of government decision-making and published a range of intelligence information for the first time.

It is thus now possible to see exactly what the government and this Prime Minister knew about Iraq, and when they knew it.

The report finds that the Prime Minister exaggerated the condition of Iraq's illicit weapons well beyond the assessments of the intelligence services or the United Nations inspectors.

In this case, there is the clearest evidence from information in the public domain that Tony Blair not only misled parliament, but had also entered into a prior agreement with George Bush to go to war in Iraq.

Add to these charges the negligence and incompetence shown throughout this sorry affair, the thousands of coalition soldiers who have died, and the tens of thousands of Iraqi dead.

The case is that the Prime Minister made 28 statements about Iraq's weapons that were not supported by the intelligence assessments available to him. To give but one example, on 17 September 2002, his chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, wrote in an e-mail that when publishing the intelligence dossier the Government needed to make it clear that:

‘we do not claim that we have evidence that he – Saddam Hussein – is an imminent threat’.

One week later, however, when the Prime Minister presented the dossier to the House of Commons, he said that the threat was ‘serious and current’. It is impossible to reconcile the e-mail from the Prime Minister’s chief of staff with the statement that the Prime Minister made to the House a week later.

Twelve occasions documented in *A Case to Answer* show that the Prime Minister failed either to disclose available counter-evidence or to ensure that it came into the public domain. I was particularly struck by the case of Saddam Hussein’s ill-fated son-in-law, Hussein Kamel, who was often cited by the Prime Minister as providing evidence for the possession of weapons of mass destruction. However, we now know, from the Butler inquiry, that British intelligence had access to information that he gave the UN weapons inspectors on 7 August 1995, when he said that he had personally ordered the destruction of weapons of mass destruction. That information proved to be correct, but the point is that, although available, it was not presented to the House or to the wider public.

Butler expressed great surprise at the failure formally to withdraw material that was found to be false until much later in the process – even now the Prime Minister is disinclined to tell us when that particular fact became available to him. And there’s the question of whether the Prime Minister entered into an agreement with the United States without the consent of Cabinet, Parliament or the people.

I was struck by *Plan of Attack*, which was written by Bob Woodward – who was involved in a previous impeachment – with the compliance of the White House, and describes events in September 2002. It states:

‘On the morning of Sept. 7, 2002 Blair left London on a transatlantic flight to see Bush at Camp David. In Blair’s conversations with Bush, it was increasingly clear to the Prime Minister how committed Bush was to action ... Bush looked Blair in the eye. “Saddam Hussein is a threat. And we must work together to deal with this threat, and the world will be better off without him.” Bush recalled that he was “probing” and “pushing” the Prime Minister. He said it might require – would probably entail – war. Blair might have to send British troops. “I’m with you”, the Prime Minister replied, looking Bush back in the eye, pledging flat out to commit British military force if necessary, the critical promise that Bush had been seeking.’

If we believe that account or, even more pertinently, the other information now in the public domain, it is nothing like what the House of Commons was then being told. Any reasonable person would at least conclude from the dossier and the mass of information that there was a process whereby Parliament was not told the truth and that there is a case to answer.

With the imminent departure of the Prime Minister, it would seem he will escape impeachment – whether the Labour Party escapes the judgement of the people during the local, Scottish and Welsh elections is another matter entirely.

**Published as A Case to Answer and available from Spokesman (www.spokesmanbooks.com) price £5.*