

Regime change or disarming WMD?

Blair's contradictions

Lynne Jones

Lynne Jones was, until April 2010, the distinguished Member of Parliament for Birmingham Selly Oak. This excerpt is from her detailed submission to the Iraq Inquiry under Sir John Chilcot, prepared with the assistance of Ingrid Davidson. The Inquiry had sought the views of MPs, but then declined to publish them. The full submission is available online.

Legally, regime change and disarmament of Iraqi WMD via the United Nations were two separate and different bases for war. We know that it would not have been possible to get a legal agreement for war on the basis of regime change and this was made clear to Tony Blair in a letter from Jack Straw dated 25 March 2002. Tony Blair was told this again in July 2002 in the 'Downing Street Memo'. This records that the Attorney-General told the Prime Minister that the desire for regime change was not a legal base for military action. Yet, in his evidence to your inquiry, Tony Blair tries to 'merge' the two distinct rationales for going to war:

'I think there is a danger that we end up with a very sort of binary distinction between regime change here and WMD here.'

He continued with this point as he was questioned further:

'It is more a different way of expressing the same proposition. The Americans in a sense were saying, "We are for regime change because we don't trust he is ever going to give up his WMD ambitions". We were saying, "We have to deal with his WMD ambitions. If that means regime change, so be it".'

I urge the Inquiry panel to consider this very closely. Saying 'we are going to remove a regime from power because we think it poses a threat' is not the same as saying 'we want to make a regime complaint with international obligations on WMD and will use force to achieve this if necessary'. Whilst the outcome of these two rationales for using force could be the same (regime change) the objectives are clearly distinct.

A number of statements by Tony Blair in the run up to the war show that in seeking support for his policy towards Iraq, he repeatedly made use of the clear distinction between the policies of regime change and disarmament. On the day the Government's September 2002 dossier was launched in the House of Commons, Tony Blair was asked if regime change was his objective and he replied that it was not:

'Regime change in Iraq would be a wonderful thing. That is not the purpose of our action; our purpose is to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction ...'

He made the distinction between regime change and disarmament again, on 25 February 2003:

'I detest his [Saddam Hussein's] regime – I hope most people do – but even now, he could save it by complying with the UN's demand. Even now, we are prepared to go the extra step to achieve disarmament peacefully.'

And, on 18 March 2003, in his speech in favour of the resolution for war, Tony Blair told MPs that regime change was never the justification for military action:

'I have never put the justification for action as regime change. We have to act within the terms set out in resolution 1441 – that is our legal base.'

Tony Blair made a clear distinction between the two policies for political reasons as well as legal reasons. The public UK policy that Iraq had to disarm left open the possibility for Saddam Hussein to comply with the demands made on him, via UN resolutions, and for his regime to continue. This argument was used by Tony Blair to suggest that UK policy was in line with the principle that it should be left to the people of individual nations to change their regime/government, unless pre-emptive military action is needed either to avert an overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe or for self defence and that there must be international consensus that this is the case (i.e. through the UN).

The principle is there because of the innumerable ramifications for the long-term future of a country, its region and world stability when one government is overthrown by another. The distinction between US-led regime change on the one hand, and international action with UN authorisation on the other, was very live within the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) in 2002/2003. Without majority PLP support, Parliamentary authority for the use of force might not have been won. The case that Tony Blair put to doubting colleagues was that regime change was not the basis for UK involvement and that he personally considered Saddam Hussein to

be both a current and long-term threat because of WMD.

Regime change by outside military force and the disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capability via the UN were two distinct and separate policy objectives, both politically and legally. Tony Blair clearly told the House that regime change was not the purpose of military action in Iraq. The question is, was he misleading the House?

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Did Tony Blair commit the United Kingdom to the policy of regime change?

Your Inquiry questioned Tony Blair about whether he signed the UK up to military action during his private meeting with George Bush at his Crawford ranch in April 2002. He responded that the essence of his assurance to George Bush was only that 'we are going to be with you in confronting and dealing with this threat' and that his private position was no different from his public position. Tony Blair cites the evidence of his Prime Ministerial foreign policy adviser, Sir David Manning, to back up the assertion that he had not committed the UK to a policy of regime change. In his evidence to you, David Manning appears to confirm this:

'Our view, the Prime Minister's view, the British Government's view throughout this episode was that the aim was disarmament. It was not regime change.'

However, a leaked memo from Sir David Manning to the Prime Minister dated 14 March 2002, reporting on discussions in Washington with US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, clearly records that Tony Blair had committed the UK to a policy of regime change and that Sir David Manning was fully aware of this and the ramifications for managing this position in public:

'I said [to Condoleezza Rice] that you would not budge in your support for regime change but you had to manage a press, a parliament and a public opinion that was very different than anything in the States.'

After writing this memo, Sir David Manning remained the Prime Minister's Foreign Policy adviser and was subsequently promoted to be British Ambassador to Washington. It is therefore fair to presume that David Manning accurately transmitted Tony Blair's view to the US administration.

The Chilcot Inquiry was criticised in the press for not raising the 14 March 2002 memo from Sir David Manning to the Prime Minister with Sir

David. I urge the Panel to take this memo into consideration if it has not been made available to them from source and to comment on the discrepancy between this memo and the evidence given by Tony Blair and Sir David that the British Government's objective was not regime change.

Evidence from the UK's Ambassador to Washington, Sir Christopher Meyer, is also that Tony Blair had committed to regime change by March 2002, and he makes reference to a memo he sent to Sir David Manning on 18 March 2002 in which he stated:

'I opened by sticking very closely to the script that you used with Condi Rice. We backed regime change, but the plan had to be clever and failure was not an option. It would be a tough sell for us domestically, and probably tougher elsewhere in Europe.'

The memos referred to above are the closest to any high level record of UK policy on Iraq in early to mid 2002. They lend considerable weight to the conclusion that Tony Blair did commit to a policy of regime change, but knowing this would be difficult to 'sell', went about trying to secure international and domestic support for military action on the basis of the different stated objective of compliance with UN resolutions on disarmament.

Tony Blair's assertion that he did not sign up for regime change in March/April 2002 thus has little credibility and neither has his later argument that the policies of regime change and disarmament with respect to Iraq in 2002/2003 were 'a different way of expressing the same proposition'.

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Blair's Blunder

'I would still have thought it right to remove him. I mean obviously you would have had to use and deploy different arguments, about the nature of the threat ... I can't really think we'd be better with him and his two sons still in charge ...'

Tony Blair's reply to Fern Britton about Saddam Hussein, broadcast on BBC television in December 2009, when she asked whether he would still have gone on with plans to join the US-led invasion of Iraq had he known at the time that there were no weapons of mass destruction in the country.