

Blair's Pyrrhic Victories

By Ian Williams | February 3, 2004

On the face of it, Tony Blair had an almost Clintonesque week as he walked away from two separate train wrecks seemingly unhurt. However, beneath the surface, there are deep internal injuries that have left him seriously weakened.

His escape on the University fees issue by the tiniest handful of defections among Labor rebels was only contrived by Gordon Brown exercising his influence on some of the more prominent of them. Brown is preparing the ground for a "more in sorrow than in anger" replacement of an unelectable Blair before the next elections. He has pre-emptively cleared himself of disloyalty by acting as the, strictly temporary, king-saver.

The leadership conflict in the Labor Party has been brought forward all the more sharply by the other "victory," the Hutton Report. The Law Lord may have done British Prime Minister Tony Blair no favors at all, since public opinion overwhelmingly sees the report as a whitewash, and thus that the government has something to hide.

Even the Report's attack on the integrity of the BBC has backfired. Three times as many British people polled trusted the BBC as compared to trusting the government. Indeed almost the only supporters the government and the Report had were the Murdoch press, the *Sun* and *Times*. And even their readers may wonder whether a media empire that has never allowed the truth to interfere with the smooth flow of proprietary prejudices really has the proper standing to attack the BBC's journalistic standards.

There was a germ of truth in some of the Report's criticisms of the BBC's journalism. Ironically, under Thatcherite and New Labor pressures, it has relaxed its previous standards. The news is no longer scripted

and read, based on "balance," airing both sides. The good aspect is that, even though nominally a state-owned body, it has proved far more skeptical of the government than its privately owned counterparts in the USA. But if Andrew Gilligan had but just a shade more balance and qualifications in his initial report, as in fact he did in later versions, then he would not have left the Achilles Heel that Blair's media minders and Hutton got a noose into.

A Reprieve for Spin?

For the time being, Blair's wily spin doctor Alastair Campbell may appear to have won his long campaign to bring the broadcasters to heel. He certainly succeeded in narrowing the public agenda down to the very finicky issue of whether the BBC could prove that he personally, on behalf of the Prime Minister, had "sexed up" the reports from British intelligence about the weapons, in particular the claim that the weapons could be ready within forty-five minutes. Of course it would probably be libelous to suggest that he had actually done so, but that with his consummate skills in such matters had left no fingerprints.

However, he has continually tried to bully the BBC into submission, and he may feel that for the time being he has achieved this. But the skepticism which has greeted the report will in the long term undo his work. The broad substance of the BBC's reporting has in reality been triumphantly vindicated. Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.



But why should Hutton have gone so far? In the end, he is an establishment figure, who like many judges in Britain, has occasional bursts of independence. He supported the extradition of Pinochet to Spain, for example, but he has also spent much of his time in Northern Ireland, where, among other roles, he was the government's attorney at the inquiry into the Bloody Sunday shootings, which has since been reviled as, well, a whitewash.

Hutton is in the judicial tradition of Lord Denning, who famously thought aloud and on the record, that it would be better to keep an innocent man in prison than to risk a loss of confidence in the British judicial system, or in the pattern of the judge in author and conservative politician Jeffrey Archer's libel suit, who invited the jury to regale themselves with the sweetness and fragrance of Mrs. Archer, compared with the prostitute with whom a newspaper had alleged Archer had slept. The jury found against the newspaper, but of course a later jury convicted Archer of perjury, for which he has only recently emerged from prison himself.

So, it was far from unprecedented that Lord Hutton should have acquitted Prime Minister Tony Blair and his entourage of all wrong-doing, and attacked the BBC's integrity. However, it was bad timing to release the verdict while almost simultaneously, the head of the Coalition weapon's Inspectors, David Kay now belatedly confirmed what Hans Blix's UN inspection team had concluded a year before.

Missing the Real Issue

Saddam Hussein had no clandestine weapons of mass production, nor even research projects to develop them. Since the official excuse for launching a war on Iraq was the allegation by President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Blair that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, what significance does the Hutton Report have for this, which is at the core of the political problem?

In effect, the Report bypasses the real issue entirely. It is a minutely detailed study of one twig on a bush, which not only ignores the rest of the shrub, but contrives to ignore the forest fire around about it. Nor is it a very accurate description of the twig.

In the absence of the weapons, what is the BBC guilty of? Apparently, using one, then-anonymous source, now named and dead. And why is the government innocent? Because it had one, still unnamed, intelligence source that Iraq had weapons that could be ready in a short time. Since whoever it was has been thoroughly discredited by the absence of the weaponry, it is now highly unlikely that he or she will ever volunteer his name. And even the Judge allowed that the government may have "subconsciously influenced" the Intelligence service into giving more credence to the weapons allegations than the evidence on its own would have substantiated. He did not dwell on the possibility that Alastair Campbell's admitted part in drafting the intelligence reports may have been somewhat more than subconscious.

The Judge decided that since the Prime Minister sincerely believed these reports, he had not acted in "a dishonorable, underhand, or duplicitous way." But then he castigated the BBC for accepting the word of their reporter about a conversation with Kelly, even though it was in large measure supported by another reporter. It turns out that Occam's razor, when applied by a British law lord is like an old safety razor blade, blunted on the edge facing the establishment, but laceratingly sharp when applied to those who threaten it.

British judges' respect for Law and Order has always had more care for the latter. It appears that Hutton may well have over-larded the cake. His report has actually backfired. If he had been more measured and even handed it may well have worked every bit as well as those who chose him for the job intended.

As it is, regime change of a sort could well be one of the consequences of the Blair Bush campaign to depose Saddam Hussein. Blair was clearly wrong in

his assertions that the weapons of mass destruction existed. Since no one in Britain believed the al Qaeda-Iraq connection, and the whole appeal for support was Saddam's alleged defiance of UN resolutions, this has substantially weakened his credibility.

It has to be said that almost everyone, including the French, the Russians, and the United Nations, were also originally convinced that Iraq had weapons programs. After all, what other rational reason could Saddam Hussein have for, in effect, bluffing the rest of the world into believing that he had them, and refusing to admit the inspectors?

Blair's fatal mistake was remain attached to this idea in the face of massive evidence to the contrary and to go along with George Bush in his timetable, regardless of the reports of the UN weapons inspectors that they were drawing a blank, despite unprecedented Iraqi cooperation. Bush did not care for the technicalities of the excuses, and, it has now been revealed, only chose the UN resolution route in September 2002 after very heavy suasion from Blair, who, however, should have stuck to his guns and refused to go along with the invasion.

Even now, with the UN reports in, with David Kay's testimony, and with a complete absence of any evidence, Blair and his team refuse to admit they were wrong. It would actually restore much of their credibility if they could admit that Saddam Hussein had suckered them into believing that he was more of a threat than he really was. But it seems that Presidents and Prime Ministers have now joined Popes in the platoon of the infallible.

Without some admission on his part, the public has to decide whether the Prime Minister was sincere, but either misled or stupid. Or he could have been so desperate to please George W. Bush that he persuaded himself that more evidence actually existed than there really was. Or he was so mendacious, that to conceal his real agenda of regime change, he marshaled a set of excuses that later failed. None of these positions actually strengthen his position, so he may follow the example of the BBC's bosses and do the honorable thing. Resign before the election. But like them, he will need a shove. Brown is waiting.

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