

# A PM who has lost the nation's trust

**Editorial**

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**O**n both sides of the Atlantic it is becoming increasingly clear that both the British and US public are fast losing trust in their leaders. When it comes to being asked to support their calls for going to war, we are not in a position to verify the intelligence upon which they claim they must act. When we later are told that the intelligence was flawed and that the head of the CIA, George Tenet, claims he never said there was an imminent threat from Saddam Hussein's Iraq and that, anyway, the reports of weapons of mass destruction were "faulty" due to poor human intelligence on the ground, then we all know that the game is up. That's why the polls on both sides of the Atlantic show that Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George Bush are fast losing the trust of the people. Yesterday, an NOP poll for The Independent found 54% of the public think Blair "lied" – yes, that is the word they were asked to give their opinion on – "to the nation" over Iraq. And the public has also lost any trust in Blair's attempts to placate their concerns with his new Butler Inquiry into the failure to find any WMD. The poll showed 68% believe it will be another whitewash. Finally 51% believe Blair should go, while the Tories move into the lead over Labour. In short, the public have had enough of having the wool pulled over their eyes.

If, as is becoming increasingly clear, the intelligence services cannot provide the substance for their government's claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, it would mean Bush and Blair took their countries into a possibly illegal war, having based their case for action on unverified suppositions. And this they did without gaining any clear international support, or legal basis, for their actions.

It is an unseemly sight to see Blair twisting in the wind over being caught out. He is finally beginning to accept that no WMD have been found. But he now insists that Saddam was guilty of breaching UN resolutions in other ways and failing to prove Iraq didn't have any WMD. And anyway, the world is now a safer place and, Blair told us, "we should all be proud of our part in that".

Bad luck for Blair that Brian Jones, a former intelligence official, claimed last week that not

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a single defence intelligence expert had backed the Prime Minister's most contentious arguments about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The September 2002 dossier carried serial claims that Iraq could deploy WMD weapons in 45 minutes. But it now appears that the reference was to tactical weapons and not to longer range missiles. Blair then has the audacity to suggest that he had no idea there was a difference between the two! Geoff Hoon, the defence secretary, certainly did but, amazingly, admitted that he did not have a duty to correct the misapprehension and the headlines that followed publication of the dossier such as the London Evening Standard's "45 minutes from doom".

Then there is the US view of things. In the face of all the doubt and recrimination, Bush continues to take a relaxed view of his position towards Iraq. Even before the war began, as the Sunday Herald has revealed, he and his top advisers were intent on toppling Saddam Hussein and effecting regime change right from the outset of his presidency in 2001. That understanding drove US policy, and the justification was enshrined in the administration's national security statement, namely that the US would make pre-emptive strikes against countries which posed a direct threat.

All this flies in the face of statements made by Bush's closest advisers. First his chief weapons inspector in Iraq, David Kay, made the damaging assessment that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction on the eve of the US-led invasion. Then there was last week's sorry admission by secretary of state Colin Powell that he would not have recommended an invasion had he known that Iraq did not possess the 500 tonnes of banned weapons that he was told they had. Yet this is the same Colin Powell who stood before the UN Security Council (and the world) and made a powerful case for acting against Saddam. Who could dismiss his slick presentation of "real high calibre" evidence of WMD?

Yet once the war was over, the intelligence was found to be wildly inaccurate. The mobile laboratories were just big trucks, and one chemical facility turned out to be a flour mill. But at the time, Powell's evidence was decisive in encouraging doubters to throw their lot behind those who supported the war. Sadly, Powell's about-turn was followed by a quick retraction – it turned out that, in spite of everything, the President had made the right decision. Not for the first time Powell had expressed his true feelings – he is a reluctant war-monger – only for the White House to lean on him by appealing to his soldier's instinctive loyalty. However, the White House was not yet out of the woods. Powell's concession was followed last week by a presentation by Tenet in which he argued that intelligence can never be precise. That means only one thing: it depends on the interpretation – and the CIA might have got it wrong.

Tenet sat behind Powell during the Security Council presentation providing sinister encouragement and lending weight to the idea that the evidence was up to scratch. Yet, last

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week, in a humiliating climbdown, he admitted that there has been nothing to support the CIA's intelligence reports about the WMD and that the evidence may never be found. All that he could offer by way of comfort was the thought that Iraq had a history of using such weapons and had probably hidden them. This falls far short of the vindication which Bush's supporters were seeking and simply underscores the unfounded speculations that are at the heart of the British and US dossiers on Iraq's weapons capabilities.

None of this will hold water. There is little need for carefully staged inquiries or charades into what went wrong. Instead both leaders have to come clean about their reasons for taking the decision to go to war. By its very nature, intelligence will always be imprecise – it comes from a variety of sources and can never paint a totally accurate picture. That much has been acknowledged by both the British and the US services. What needs elucidation now is the interpretation put on the intelligence. It is quite simple, really: both Bush and Blair have to admit why, when and how they came to their conclusion that Iraq was dangerous enough to be bombed into submission and its government unseated? Unless they come up with convincing answers, we will be left with the unnerving conclusion that it is alright to commit pre-emptive strikes based on unverified evidence and that people will be killed as a result. Not only is that policy questionable from a moral point of view, but it goes against the rules of international law. Is that really how we expect our governments to behave? The answer is becoming increasingly obvious as each poll is showing. People have lost patience with not being told the truth. The Sunday Herald has tried to explain the real and secret reasons that Bush went to war against Iraq. For those not familiar with the Project for the New American Century which defines all Bush's foreign policy, we suggest readers go to our website where we detail the plans laid in 1998 to wage war against Iraq, once Bush was elected. That is the real story which is still to be told, and of course the way in which Blair signed Britain up to Bush's secret project.

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*This is the text of an editorial that appeared in the Glasgow-based Sunday Herald, Scotland's leading newspaper.*