

# Public opinion: No value

**By David Cromwell**

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**I**n 1794, George Washington confided to Alexander Hamilton, a fellow architect of the nascent US republic forged upon democratic ideals, that he had “long since learned to hold public opinion of no value.” Just over a century later, in 1898, US Senator Albert Beveridge publicly disparaged the notion “that we ought not to govern a people without their consent.” The “rule of liberty that all just government derives its authority from the consent of the governed,” he declared, “applies only to those who are capable of self-government. We govern the [native American] Indians without their consent, we govern our children without their consent.”

These are but two examples of elite disdain for public opinion and genuine democracy. The tradition is long and dishonourable.

In 2004, in continuance of the needs of power, the US occupation in Iraq is certainly not about to relinquish its attempts to impose neo-colonial domination and to allow true democracy. The natives, presumably, are just not “capable of self-government”. Accordingly, preparations for Iraqi elections need to be carefully managed in advance. As Noah Feldman, a New York University law professor and the Coalition Provisional Authority’s constitutional law adviser, told the New York Times: “If you move too fast, the wrong people could get elected.” Indeed, a poll in October 2003 by the Center for Research and Strategic Studies found that 56 percent of respondents wanted an Islamic Iraq. Meanwhile, as civilians and US-trained security forces in Iraq continue to suffer the brunt of spiralling violence, mainstream media continue to talk of the “hope” that the US will be able “to hand over power by 30 June and extricate its troops...from the Iraqi quagmire”.

Naomi Klein points out that the US ‘handover of power’ actually equates to appointing approved candidates:

“Mr. Bremer wants his Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to appoint the members of 18 regional organizing committees. The committees will then select delegates to form 18 selection caucuses. These selected delegates will then further select representatives to a transitional national assembly. The assembly will have an internal vote to select an executive and ministers who will form the new government of Iraq. That, Bush said in his address,

## Public opinion: No value | 2

constitutes ‘a transition to full Iraqi sovereignty.’ ”

Fear of genuine democracy, at home and abroad, is a familiar theme in establishment circles everywhere. Sometimes it slips out into the open. Recently, Tony Blair said bluntly: “We can’t end up having an inquiry into whether the war [in Iraq] was right or wrong. That is something that we have got to decide. We are the politicians.”

No independent inquiry will be allowed the possibility of judging whether Blair’s government was right or wrong to hitch its wagon to the Bush war caravan. That would simply be political suicide given that public feelings of scepticism, indeed outright betrayal, are running high. According to a recent opinion poll, fully 54 per cent of the British population believe that Blair lied over Iraq. An even higher proportion – 68 per cent – believe that the forthcoming Butler inquiry into the failure to find WMDs in Iraq will be a whitewash.

The monitoring group IraqBodyCount.net conservatively estimates that over 10,000 Iraqi civilians have now died as a result of the invasion and occupation. Neither the US or British military, nor the Coalition Provisional Authority, have kept a record of Iraqi civilian or military casualties. Indeed, Washington and London have both rejected calls for them to compile such totals. Until December last year, Dr Nagham Mohsen, an official at the Iraqi Health Ministry, was compiling casualty figures from hospital records. According to a barely noticed Associated Press report, she was ordered to stop collating this data by her immediate superior. The health minister Dr Khodeir Abbas denied that this order was inspired or encouraged by the Coalition Provisional Authority.

Adam Ingram, the UK defence minister, had already offered the following ludicrous evasion as government policy: “Through very strict rules of engagement, the use of precision munitions and the tactical methods employed to liberate Iraq’s major cities, we are satisfied that the coalition did everything possible to avoid unnecessary casualties. We do not, therefore, propose to undertake a formal review of Iraqi casualties sustained.”

The US-UK line that “unnecessary” casualties would be avoided wherever possible has been a constant refrain in the attack on Iraq, just as it was in earlier illegal attacks on Afghanistan in 2001 and the former Yugoslavia in 1999. The government is “satisfied” and the case is thus closed.

Taking government pronouncements at face value, as ever, the BBC repeats the propaganda: “the aim of the US and British is to reduce [civilian casualties] to a minimum and to reduce damage to the civilian infrastructure to a minimum as well”. As “Shock and Awe” was about to be unleashed on Iraq, BBC defence correspondent Jonathan Marcus was opining that “the level of casualties on both sides will depend upon the degree of Iraqi resistance.” Presumably, any deaths and injuries have little to do with the actions of the

## Public opinion: No value | 3

invading superpower.

But then mainstream journalists can be relied upon to provide useful cover for “coalition” war crimes. Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee, for example, is consumed by “Blair’s personal tragedy”; namely: “the squandering of his political capital over Iraq.” Toynbee fails to mention the personal tragedy of vast numbers of Iraqis. Her response to a reader’s challenge enters the canon of stupefying journalistic glibness: “Well, in the end I guess Iraq will judge whether it was worth it on whether they get peace and democracy, or an outbreak of internecine civil war. If the former, maybe the deaths will seem worthwhile.” This brutal remark echoes the words of UK Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, last year when it was put to him that the Iraqi mothers of children killed by cluster bombs would not thank British forces for their actions. Hoon replied: “One day they might.”

A restricted, power-friendly notion of “tragedy” is also conveyed by John Kampfner, the political editor of the *New Statesman*, in a recent article on the fallout from the Hutton inquiry: “The death of Dr David Kelly and the events that led to it are a triple tragedy. They are a tragedy for his family, a tragedy for the better scrutiny of government and a tragedy for investigative journalism.”

Again, fitting the usual pattern, there is no reference to the tragedy that has befallen so many people in Iraq. Instead, Kampfner’s emphasis is on the impact on investigative journalism and, in particular, the BBC. Thus: “The corporation was beginning to break out of its ‘on the one hand, on the other, only time will tell’ straitjacket that had dictated coverage for decades. It was beginning to ask searching questions, to allow its senior correspondents to go out on a limb, to ‘call’ stories and to get stories.”

Kampfner upholds the myth that the BBC has been hamstrung by an ‘impartiality’ and ‘objectivity’ that has emasculated any journalistic efforts to penetrate to the heart of news stories. That the BBC has, in fact, been a faithful propaganda organ for the views of state-corporate power is beyond thinkable thought. Instead, post-Hutton, Kampfner writes of his hope of seeing “the corporation embark[ing] on the long haul back to respectability [sic]”.

The acquiescence of the British media in the face of relentless government propaganda about the supposed threat of Iraq, is merely “another example of lazy journalism” in Kampfner’s eyes. The exhumation of this ‘liberal herring’, as Media Lens likes to call such deceptions, echoes the words of Channel 4 news presenter Jon Snow:

“Journalists are lazy, they live in a goldfish bowl, they’re not interested in breaking out and breaking this stuff [controversial stories] themselves.”

Despite the media’s continuing smokescreen for government war crimes, as well as the media’s own role in facilitating them, public distrust in both institutions remains unabated – perhaps precisely because so many people can, in fact, see through the smokescreen.

## Public opinion: No value | 4

In a sign of the desperation that is afflicting the Blair government, Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment and Food, warned rebel Labour members of parliament that it would be “the politics of madness” to vote against the government in the recent vote on tuition fees. Beckett added: “We are approaching an abyss and I hope people will look over it before they jump.” After much bullying, cajoling and coercion, the government scraped through with their smallest majority to date: a mere five votes.

That MPs might actually reflect, en masse, the concerns of their constituents – vehement opposition to Blair’s expensive warmongering, with public services such as education, health and transport remaining desperately underfunded – is progress. Such developments are indeed “the politics of madness” for a government that is overlooking its own “abyss”: a near-total loss of public trust.

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