

Chilcot's Blind Spot: Iraq War Report Buries Oil Evidence, Fails to Address Motive. Why did the UK go to War?

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The long-awaited [Chilcot Report](#) was finally released today, examining the UK's involvement in the Iraq War and occupation. Unfortunately, on the most important question, the report's conclusions are all but silent: why did the UK go to war?

Chilcot takes at face value the Blair government's claim that the motive was to address Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, and limits its criticism to mistakes in the intelligence on WMD, and on insufficient administrative and military planning. He shows a remarkable lack of curiosity about the political factors behind the move to war, especially given the weakness (even at the time) of the WMD case.

Most important of these is oil. Buried in deep in volume 9 of the 2.6 million-word report, Chilcot refers to government documents that explicitly state the oil objective, and outlining how Britain pursued that objective throughout the occupation. But he does not consider this evidence in his analysis or conclusions. Oil considerations do not even appear in the report's 150-page summary.

To many people around the world, it was obvious that oil was a central issue, as Iraq itself had nearly a [tenth](#) of the world's oil reserves, and together with its neighbouring countries nearly two thirds. There was a clear public interest in understanding how that affected UK decisions. Chilcot failed to explore it.

Section 10.3 of the report, in volume 9, records that senior government officials met secretly with BP and Shell on at several occasions ([denied](#) at the time) to discuss their commercial interests in obtaining contracts. Chilcot did not release the minutes, but we had obtained them under the Freedom of Information Act: they are posted [here](#). In unusually expressive terms for a civil service write-up, one of the meeting's minutes began, "[Iraq is the big oil prospect. BP are desperate to get in there](#)" (*emphasis in original*).

Also in that section, Chilcot includes references to several pre-war documents identifying a British objective of using Iraqi oil to boost Britain's own energy supplies. For example, a February 2002 Cabinet Office paper stated that the UK's Iraq policy falls "within our objectives of preserving peace and stability in the Gulf and [ensuring energy security](#)". A Foreign Office strategy paper in May 2003, which Chilcot didn't include, was even more explicit: "The future shape of the Iraqi oil industry will affect oil markets, and the functioning of OPEC, in both of which we have a [vital interest](#)".

So there was the motive; but how did the UK act on it? That same section 10.3 refers to numerous documents revealing the UK's evolving actions to shape the structure of the Iraqi oil industry, throughout the occupation until 2009. The government did so in close coordination with BP and Shell. This full story - *with its crucial context* - was told in [Fuel on the Fire: Oil and Politics in Occupied Iraq](#).

As the UK's strategy evolved with changing circumstances, two priority objectives remain consistently emphasised in the documents: to transfer Iraq's oil industry from public ownership to the hands of multinational companies, and to make sure BP and Shell get a large piece of that.

During the direct occupation of 2003-4, the UK consistently pushed oil policy towards the longer-term issue of privatisation, rather than the immediate rebuilding of the war-damaged infrastructure. The government installed Terry Adams, a former senior manager of BP, in Baghdad to begin that work.

British officials knew their plans were not what Iraqis wanted. One document in 2004, seen but not released by Chilcot, noted that the oil issue was "politically sensitive, touching on issues of sovereignty". Without recognising any conflict, it recommended that Britain "[push the message](#) on [foreign direct investment] to the Iraqis in private, but it will require careful handling to avoid the impression that we are trying to push the Iraqis down one particular path".

British officials actively pressed the oil issue on the interim government in 2004-5, the provisional government in 2005-6, and the permanent government of from 2006. [Foreign Secretary Jack Straw](#) wrote to Tony Blair in July 2005 setting out the progress on those activities. He wrote that Iraqi oil "remains important for the UK commercially and in terms of energy security. Foreign investment is badly needed and we need to continue to support Iraq to create the right framework for investment, while also supporting UK companies to engage".

During the December 2005 election, British Ambassador William Patey sought to pressure candidates to accept passage of an oil privatization law as a top priority for the new government. During 2006 and 2007 this law became the key focus of British and US political efforts in Iraq. Forcing passage of this law became a major focus of UK and US political efforts over the subsequent two years, and was closely tied to the "surge" in troops that President Bush announced in January 2007.

Deep in volume 9, when Chilcot refers to these British efforts, he presents them under the veneer of normal diplomatic activity, neglecting the reality that the UK and USA still had 150,000 troops the country, and had directly appointed the interim government. The permanent government in 2006 was established through elections the UK and USA had designed, and contested by the politicians they had promoted. Terry Adams was even commissioned to draft the contracts that would be signed with the likes of his former company.

In the end, attempts by Britain and the US to force a law through that legalised oil privatisation failed. The law was not passed, largely because of a [popular Iraqi campaign](#) against it. It was then decided to sign long-term contracts even without any legal basis for doing so. Iraq's oil industry is largely now run - illegally - by companies like BP, Shell and ExxonMobil.

Chilcot has said he was not asked to [judge](#) whether the war was legal. Yet in his failure to examine the real motive for war, he has side-lined crucial evidence that might tell us about the legality of the war and occupation, and the culpability of senior UK officials, including Tony Blair.

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