

Circle of Secrecy: The Iraq War's Missing Cabinet Documents

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They are unlikely to be revelatory, will shatter no myths, nor disprove any assumptions. Cabinet documents exist to merely show that a political clique - the heart of the Westminster model of government, so to speak - often contain the musings of invertebrates, spineless on most issues such as foreign policy, while operating at the behest of select interests. Hostility to originality is essential since it is threatening to the tribe; dissent is discouraged to uphold the order of collective cabinet responsibility.

The recent non-story arising from the [cabinet documents made available](#) as to why Australia participated in a murderous, destructive and most probably illegal war against Iraq in 2003 proves that point. The documents available showed, for instance, that a country, without mandatory parliamentary consultation, can go to war under the stewardship of a cabal influenced by the strategic interests of a foreign government. The Howard government, famously buried in the fatty posterior of the US imperium, was always going to commit Australian military personnel to whatever military venture Washington demanded of it. (In some cases, even without asking.)

It was modish to suggest during the "Global War on Terror" that governments with fictional weapons of mass destruction might pass them on to surrogate non-state actors. It was fashionable to misread intelligence material alleging such links, and, when that intelligence did not stack up, concoct it, as Tony Blair's government happily did, [sexed-up dossiers](#) and all, in justifying Britain's participation in the mauling of Iraq.

The larger story in the recent documents affair over Iraq was what documents were withheld from the provision to the Australian National Archives in 2020. In his January 3 press conference, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [outlined the process](#). Normally,

cabinet documents would be released two decades after their creation. Such documents are provided to the Archives three years in advance by the government of the day. But on this occasion, 78 were omitted from the transfer, enabling Albanese to point the finger firmly at his predecessor, Scott Morrison. (Those documents have since been transferred to the Archives.)

In Albanese's view,

“Australians have the right to know the basis upon which Australia went to war in Iraq. Australians lost their lives during the conflict and we know that some of the stated reasons for going to war was not correct in terms of the weapons of mass destruction that was alleged Iraq had at the time.”

Australians, he went on to say, had “a right to know what the decision-making process was”.

The mistake in question had to be corrected, and the Archives had to release the documentation provided to them. A constricting caveat, however, was appended to the declaration: the release of the documents had to “account for any national security issues [...] upon the advice of the national security agencies.”

The caveat is a good starting point to suggest that this documents saga, and the restrictions upon the disclosure of the missing 78 Cabinet records, are set to continue. For one thing, Albanese has added to the farce of secrecy by commencing an independent review that is barely worth that title. The review is to be chaired by the very sort of person you would expect to bury rather than find things: Dennis Richardson, former director of the Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation and former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Richardson's appointment continues a practice of partisan control over a process that should be beyond the national-security fraternity. There are fewer strings of accountability, as would apply, say, to the Commonwealth Ombudsman. There are no terms of reference outlined. Short of simply being a political manoeuvre that might cast a poor light on the previous government's practices, it is unclear what Richardson's purpose really is apart from justifying the retention of any of the said documents from public view.

Either way, he will be on a tidy sum for the task, something which he is becoming rather used to. As *The Klaxon* [reports](#), Richardson has been well remunerated by the PM&C for previous work. A \$50,000-a-month contract was awarded to him last year for “strategic advice and review” between August 2 and October 31. The department refuses to state what it was for, preferring the insufferably vague justification of some “need for independent research or assessment”. Be on guard whenever the term “independent” is coupled with “inquiry” or “assessment” in an Australian government context.

A [media release](#) from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet further notes that no department official or Minister has a direct role in the release or otherwise of the documents in question; the Archives will have the final say on whether those documents will be released or otherwise, whatever Albanese says. Researchers, transparency activists and those keen on open government, are almost guaranteed disappointment, given the [habitual secrecy and dysfunction](#) that characterises the operation of that body.

If there is a true lesson in this untidy business for the Albanese government, it must surely

lie in the need to debate, discuss and dissent from matters that concern the entanglement of Australia, not merely in foreign wars but in alliances that cause them. That, sadly, is a lesson that is nowhere being observed. Howard's crawling disposition has found its successor in Albanese's obsequiousness, in so far as foreign conflicts are concerned. Wherever the US war machine is deployed, Australia will hop to its aid with gleeful obedience.

And as for anything to do with revealing the Australian decision-making process about the decision to invade, despoil and ruin yet another Middle Eastern state in 2003, one is better off consulting records from the White House and the US State Department.

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