

Normalising the Crime of the Century

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I tried to contact Mark Higson the other day only to learn he had died nine years ago. He was just 40, an honourable man. We met soon after he had resigned from the Foreign Office in 1991 and I asked him if the government knew that Hawk fighter-bombers sold to Indonesia were being used against civilians in East Timor.

“Everyone knows,” he said, “except parliament and the public.”

“And the media?”

“The media – the big names – have been invited to King Charles Street (the Foreign Office) and flattered and briefed with lies. They are no trouble.”

As Iraq desk officer at the Foreign Office, he had drafted letters for ministers reassuring MPs and the public that the British Government was not arming Saddam Hussein. “This was a downright lie”, he said. “I couldn’t bear it”.

Giving evidence before the arms-to-Iraq enquiry, Higson was the only British official commended by Lord Justice Scott for telling the truth. The price he paid was the loss of his health and marriage and constant surveillance by spooks. He ended up living on benefits in a Birmingham bedsitter where he suffered a seizure, struck his head and died alone. Whistleblowers are often heroes; he was one.

He came to mind when I saw a picture in the paper of another Foreign Office official, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who was Tony Blair’s ambassador to the United Nations in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. More than anyone, it was Sir Jeremy who tried every trick to find a UN cover for the bloodbath to come. Indeed, this was his boast to the Chilcot enquiry on 27 November, where he described the invasion as “legal but of questionable legitimacy”. How clever. In the picture he wore a smirk.

Under international law, “questionable legitimacy” does not exist. An attack on a sovereign state is a crime. This was made clear by Britain’s chief law officer, Attorney General Peter Goldsmith, before his arm was twisted, and by the Foreign Office’s own legal advisers and subsequently by the secretary-general of the United Nations. The invasion is the crime of the 21st century. During 17 years of assault on a defenceless civilian population, veiled with weasel monikers like “sanctions” and “no fly zones” and “building democracy”, more people have died in Iraq than during the peak years of the slave trade. Set that against Sir Jeremy’s skin-saving revisionism about American “noises” that were “decidedly unhelpful to what I was trying to do [at the UN] in New York”. Moreover, “I myself warned the Foreign Office ... that I might have to consider my own position ...”.

It wasn't me, guv.

The purpose of the Chilcot inquiry is to normalise an epic crime by providing enough of a theatre of guilt to satisfy the media so that the only issue that matters, that of prosecution, is never raised. When he appears in January, Blair will play this part to odious perfection, dutifully absorbing the hisses and boos. All "inquiries" into state crimes are neutered in this way. In 1996, Lord Justice Scott's arms-to-Iraq report obfuscated the crimes his investigations and voluminous evidence had revealed.

At that time, I interviewed Tim Laxton, who had attended every day of the inquiry as auditor of companies taken over by MI6 and other secret agencies as vehicles for the illegal arms trade with Saddam Hussein. Had there been a full and open criminal investigation, Laxton told me, "hundreds" would have faced prosecution. "They would include," he said, "top political figures, very senior civil servants from right throughout Whitehall ... the top echelon of government."

That is why Chilcot is advised by the likes of Sir Martin Gilbert, who compared Blair with Churchill and Roosevelt. That is why the inquiry will not demand the release of documents that would illuminate the role of the entire Blair gang, notably Blair's 2003 cabinet, long silent. Who remembers the threat of the thuggish Geoff Hoon, Blair's "defence secretary", to use nuclear weapons against Iraq?

In February, Jack Straw, one of Blair's principal accomplices, the man who let the mass murderer General Pinochet escape justice and the current "justice secretary", overruled the Information Commissioner who had ordered the government to publish Cabinet minutes during the period Lord Goldsmith was pressured into changing his judgement that the invasion was illegal. How they fear exposure, and worse.

The media has granted itself immunity. On 27 November, Scott Ritter, the former UN chief weapons inspector, wrote that the invasion "was made far easier given the role of useful idiot played by much of the mainstream media in the US and Britain." More than four years before the invasion, Ritter, in interviews with myself and others, left not a shred of doubt that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction had been disabled, yet he was made a non-person. In 2002, when the Bush/Blair lies were in full echo across the media, the Guardian and Observer mentioned Iraq in more than 3,000 articles, of which 49 referred to Ritter and his truth that could have saved thousands of lives.

What has changed? On 30 November, the Independent published a pristine piece of propaganda from its embedded man in Afghanistan. "Troops fear defeat at home," said the headline. Britain, said the report, "is at serious risk of losing its way in Afghanistan because rising defeatism at home is demoralising the troops on the front line, military commanders have warned." In fact, public disgust with the disaster in Afghanistan is mirrored among many serving troops and their families; and this frightens the warmongers. So "defeatism" and "demoralising the troops" are added to the weasel lexicon. Good try. Unfortunately, like Iraq, Afghanistan is a crime. Period.

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