

# Satrap Guilt: Australia, Iraq and the Chilcot Inquiry

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*The release of the Chilcot Iraq Inquiry, examining the feeble reasons for launching a war against a sovereign state in 2003, did not merely land former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the soup. It suggested that other leaders should keep him in drowning company.*

The most obvious culprit was the person who led it all, US President George W. Bush. The other was former Australian Prime Minister John Howard. The 12 volumes and 2.6 million words do little to exonerate either.[1]

Evident in the apologetics over the Iraq War lie are notions of pure belief, detached from foundations of reason. There was no intention to deceive (this, being palpably untrue); there was a genuinely held sense that war was necessary. The show, in other words, was being run by fanatics.

The evidence (is there such a thing post-Iraq?), certainly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, was the overwhelming desire to rechart the Middle East and affect regime change in Iraq. Blair and Howard complied with the Bush agenda, neither ever keen to go too much into the detail.

The few times that greater inquiry took place, it was grim, as Blair's own meditation on possible consequences shows. "Suppose it got militarily tricky... suppose Iraq suffered unexpected civilian casualties... suppose the Arab Street finally erupted." The law of unintended consequences indeed.

Howard had little time to dwell on the idea of mendacity, claiming it had nothing to do with the deployment of troops to Iraq. Rather awkwardly, he resorted to a familiar tactic: blaming the intelligence community for getting it wrong. Never mind the actual decision maker who needed to see such intelligence in total context. "There was no lie. There were errors in intelligence, but there was no lie." [2]

Ever the Pilate washing his hands, Howard cherry picked from the Chilcot Inquiry to add a bit more soap to his cleansing wash. One fact stood out for him: the lack of evidence suggesting that intelligence dossiers had been doctored, or sexed-up, as it was then termed.

"The joint intelligence committee, which is the broad equivalent in the United Kingdom of the Office of National assessments in Australia, accepted ownership of the dossier and agreed its content."

This also shows the inability, or perhaps refusal, of Howard to have made his own decisions

on the subject without further verifying what was, even then, a shoddy case. “I can’t put myself in Tony Blair’s mind. I have no reason to disbelieve what he’d said. I always found him a thoroughly honourable and honest person to deal with.”

Even by the standards of the day, such an assessment on Howard’s part was astonishing, relegating the Australian decision making process to the sovereign realm of Washington and London. It was sufficient to accept that the dossier was not unduly corrupted by the addition of improper material or that “Number 10 improperly influenced the text.”

For all that, there were Cassandras within Australia, and fellow traveller Britain, worried that too much certainty, spurred on by “belief”, was replacing genuine intelligence.

One such figure was Andrew Wilkie, now a returned independent member of the Australian parliament. Having been an intelligence officer within the Office of National Assessments and subsequent whistleblower on the dubious intelligence practices he bore witness to, the Tasmanian MP insisted that Australia needed its own variant of Chilcot.

“Until we have an effective inquiry into the invasion of Iraq... then people like John Howard and [former foreign minister] Alexander Downer and others won’t be properly scrutinised and held to account.”[3]

One crucial loss in this entire affair is evident. Instead of offering wise restraining counsel, holding back that “crazy man Bush,” as Paul McGeough described him, Howard and Blair applied the varnishing reassurance. “By not restraining the US president, each was an enabler in Washington’s worst ever foreign policy blunder.”[4]

They were more than that. Both became fellow buccaneers and adventurers, the very type of war makers scorned by the US Supreme Court justice Robert Jackson, a key figure in the prosecution at the Nuremberg war crimes trials in 1945. Never again, urged Jackson, should war be treated in a chivalric or romantic fashion. Instead, it could be deemed conspiratorially murderous, a slight against civilization itself waged by bandits.

While the Chilcot Inquiry does not purport to generate legal implications (its greatest weakness), it sets the groundwork for potential legal proceedings that might be launched not merely in Britain, but participating countries. Lawyers representing former servicemen who died in the conflict are pouring over the details, wondering whether command responsibility can be discerned.

Wilkie insists on a specific international court, one that would compel the defendants to “try to prove their innocence because all of those people who do accuse them of war crimes I think make a pretty compelling case.”

Doing so in the International Criminal Court would be a difficult thing, given its limitations relative to the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal. But the crime against peace remains a burning issue, recognised as part of international law, and prosecutable locally. None of the leaders are out of the woods of judicial inquiry just yet.

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[1] <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-report/>

- [2] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-07/chilcot-inquiry-john-howard-responds/7577306>
- [3] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-07/wilkie-blames-bali-bombing-lindt-siege-on-iraq-war-involvement/7576480>
- [4] <http://www.smh.com.au/world/chilcot-report-the-mindboggling-incompetence-of-bush-blair-and-howard-laid-bare-20160706-gq06hy.html>

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