

The Chilcot Inquiry. The British Government's Role in the War on Iraq. Margaret Aldred and the Judicial Coverup

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Introductory Note

The Chilcot Inquiry chaired by Sir John Chilcot was launched in 2009 by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, with the mandate to inquire into role of British government in the Iraq War.

There have been five inquiries in the United Kingdom into the Iraq War: the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC), the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), the Hutton Inquiry, the Butler Inquiry and the Chilcot Inquiry (the Iraq Inquiry). Not a single word of evidence at any of those inquiries has been heard under oath. Sir John Chilcot, presently chairing the Chilcot Inquiry, has the unique distinction of sitting on two of those inquiries: the Butler Inquiry and the Chilcot Inquiry. Does this not constitute a conflict of interests?

The person running the Chilcot Inquiry on behalf of Chilcot is one Margaret Aldred, an unelected civil servant, who, in my opinion and in the opinion of others, is not fit to be running any inquiry (she infamously ordered Carne Ross before he gave evidence to the Chilcot Inquiry not to mention Dr David Kelly and outlined the consequences if he did so), and certainly not the Chilcot Inquiry (because of an overwhelming conflict of interests, and other reasons, as carefully outlined below).

Margaret Aldred is fatally tainted by a huge conflict of interests

Stephen Frost

Elfyn Llwyd MP outlines in a Westminster Hall debate why Margaret Aldred should not be running the Chilcot Inquiry:

<http://www.theyworkforyou.com/whall/?gid=2011-01-25b.52.1>

[Elfyn Llwyd](#) (Dwyfor Meirionnydd, Plaid Cymru)

It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Williams, ably chairing this debate as always.

One of the vital prerequisites of a Government-initiated inquiry is that it should be utterly independent and devoid of any conflicts of interest that might undermine its credibility and

the veracity of its conclusions and findings. I shall detail why I have grave misgivings about the independence of the Chilcot inquiry, and why I believe that the inquiry process may be flawed and even compromised from the beginning. I realise that those are grave allegations, but I do not make them lightly.

Before I detail the problems as I see them, I should mention that about three years ago, some documents were dispatched to my office from an unknown source, bearing a note saying that they were top secret. Some were British in origin; others may well have been from other intelligence sources. They showed that in 2001-02, active discussions were taking place on how to move in against Saddam Hussein using overwhelming military force. The term “regime change” appeared. The documents proved beyond doubt that the UK Government were on course for war even then.

The documents must have been copies of authentic documents, as two senior officers from the Metropolitan police visited me and questioned me and my colleague Adam Price about them. At the time of that visit, the documents were not physically in our possession. I decided to leave them where they were and not disclose them to anyone. I could not tell the police officers who had leaked them, as I simply did not know, and neither did Adam Price.

When the Chilcot inquiry was set up, I decided that I should surrender the documents to the inquiry. I took them to the inquiry’s office in Victoria street and handed them to Mrs Margaret Aldred, the secretary of the inquiry. I said that I had evidence that might be of assistance to the inquiry and asked Mrs Aldred if the inquiry would write to confirm whether I would be called to give evidence. I told her that I had no intention of politicking if I were called. The response was an icy stare and the words “I should jolly well hope not.”

Months went by. I wrote on two or three occasions asking for a response, but no response was forthcoming until last autumn, some nine months later. I concluded that either the secretariat was not very orderly and professional or my letters had not been passed on to the chair of the inquiry, who eventually responded. I had been discreet. As a Member of Parliament for 19 years, I thought that I should have had the courtesy of a reply one way or the other within weeks rather than months.

I began to think that something might be amiss in the secretariat, and I made various inquiries about the process of appointing the secretary. I knew that the appointment fell under the civil service code, whose key values are openness, honesty, integrity and accuracy. Recent legislation has placed those values on a statutory basis. I then tabled some parliamentary questions, and I shall refer to two of them.

On 1 December, I asked

“(1) what skills and experience were identified as being required for the role of Secretary to the Iraq Inquiry; how many candidates were identified as having such skills and experience; and on what basis the successful candidate was selected;

(2) what steps were taken in the process of appointment of the Secretary to the Iraq Inquiry (a) to identify potential conflicts of interest and (b) to ensure that any such conflicts did not affect the independence of the inquiry.”

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, [Mr. Hurd](#), responded:

“The Cabinet Secretary decided to nominate the Secretary to the Iraq Inquiry and agreed the appointment with the Chairman of the Inquiry. Both the Cabinet Secretary and the Chairman of the Inquiry agreed that the Secretary to the Inquiry should be a senior individual in the civil service ideally with previous involvement in Iraq issues.”

The Chairman of the Inquiry has told the Cabinet Secretary that, in agreeing to the appointment, he was aware of the candidate’s role in the Foreign and Defence Policy (formerly the Defence and Overseas Policy) Secretariat in the Cabinet Office from November 2004, and, given the professional standards of the senior civil service, saw no potential conflict of interest with her appointment as Secretary to the Inquiry that would, in his view, affect the independence of the Inquiry.”-[[Hansard, 1 December 2010; Vol. 519, c. 882W.](#)]

It was, therefore, the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Gus O’Donnell, who put Mrs Margaret Aldred’s name forward for appointment as the secretary to the inquiry, and it was accepted, nem. con., by its chair, Sir John Chilcot.

On 3 September 2009, Dr Chris Lamb, who has been very concerned about this issue, wrote a freedom of information request to the Cabinet Office asking for the precise details of the manner of the appointment. On 2 September 2010 -one whole year later-a letter, signed off by Sue Gray of the propriety and ethics team of the Cabinet Office, was sent in response. It stated:

“The Cabinet Secretary himself decided to nominate Margaret Aldred, and agreed the appointment with Sir John Chilcot, shortly after Sir John himself had accepted his role as Inquiry Chair. Both the Cabinet Secretary and the Inquiry Chair felt that the Secretary needed to be a senior individual with the right experience and skills for the task. Her previous involvement in Iraq issues was balanced against that criteria, and the view taken was that it would be possible to manage any potential conflicts of interest. Margaret Aldred was assured of that position by the Cabinet Secretary from the outset. She took up the appointment full time on 1 September last year.”

The appointment did not follow the procedures outlined in the civil service code-it appears that no other candidate was considered by Sir Gus O’Donnell, and the process could not be described in any way as open and transparent. I will repeat what I believe to be the letter’s key phrase:

“Her previous involvement in Iraq issues was balanced against other criteria, and the view was taken that it would be possible to manage any potential conflicts of interest.”

Unsurprisingly, Dr Lamb was totally unsatisfied with the answer. He made a complaint to the Information Commissioner, and it was dealt with by Jonathan Slee, a senior case officer, who concluded in a letter dated 26 October 2010 that there were two possible scenarios. The first was that the Cabinet Office had no recorded information

“concerning the discussions in question. That is to say, such discussions took place orally (as opposed to in writing) and no written record of them was ever created. If this was the case presumably the narrative description of these discussions/deliberations which is included in the internal review was based

purely on individuals' recollection of them."

On the second scenario, he wrote:

"Alternatively, the Cabinet Office did hold recorded information evidencing the nature of these discussions. The most obvious format for such recorded information would presumably be letters/emails exchanged between the Cabinet Secretary and Inquiry Chairman regarding Margaret Aldred, although such recorded information could obviously extend to meeting notes/memos/records of telephone conversations."

The letter goes on to discuss another individual before noting:

"If this is the case, I suggested to the Cabinet Office that such recorded information was presumably used as the basis to provide the narrative description of the discussions which was included in the internal review. However, for the reasons set out above I suggested that Cabinet Office would not have not fulfilled your request simply by describing the content of these recorded discussions. Rather the request would only be fulfilled by provision of the recorded information about the discussions themselves."

The pre-penultimate paragraph of the letter concludes:

"However, I appreciate that the manner in which the Cabinet Office has handled this request will no doubt have proved frustrating. I therefore intend to formally write to the Cabinet Office in order to highlight its errors in terms of handling this request, notably the failure to correctly determine whether it held information falling within the scope of the request when issuing its refusal notice; the very significant delay in conducting an internal review; and the fact that the content of the internal review was somewhat ambiguous in inferring that Cabinet Office did hold some recorded information."

Despite the best efforts of a very experienced researcher using the Freedom of Information Act 2000, it appears that there is no paper trail relating to the appointment or that, if there is, the Cabinet Office resolutely refuses to disclose it, for whatever reason.

We are left with the appointment of the deputy head of the Cabinet Office's foreign and defence policy secretariat, Margaret Aldred, as secretary to the inquiry that is inquiring into actions taken by her department during her tenure as its deputy head. So integral was she in policy development that she gave evidence to the Select Committee on Defence in June 1994 about whether weaponised biological agents were present. She was part and parcel of all the planning for Gulf war I. She regularly chaired the Iraq senior officials group, which co-ordinated Iraq policy across the Government.

The appointment process was unusual and unacceptable, and the irony will not be lost on the public. The process resurrected one of the worst features of sofa government, which was so criticised by the Butler inquiry, of which Sir John Chilcot was, sadly, a member. The inquiry secretary, who has a key role, is a Cabinet Office insider and was appointed because of her extensive previous involvement in Iraq policy. There is therefore a glaring conflict of interest. Some might say her position is untenable because the inquiry is looking into the

period when she was active in Iraq policy, as I said.

The very same Cabinet Office has most to answer for over Iraq. The Cabinet Office, and Mrs Aldred's section in particular, drew up plans for regime change-an unlawful concept in international law. The Cabinet Office-the Joint Intelligence Committee and its staff-produced the discredited Iraq dossier, one of the least persuasive documents in recent political history, which is of dubious provenance and even more dubious veracity. Can the inquiry be independent, or is it a Cabinet Office subsidiary? Mrs Aldred's involvement and that of her section makes it difficult to know where the Cabinet Office ends and the inquiry begins.

Sir John Chilcot is leading an inquiry that is tasked with examining allegations that the previous Government was duplicitous towards Parliament and the public. Surely, when Sir Gus O'Donnell suggested his close colleague, so enmeshed as she was in the whole Iraq debacle, Sir John should have seen the obvious conflict of interest? Has Mrs Aldred played a part in the protocol that has limited the inquiry's scope? What steps have been taken to manage the conflict of interest? What steps could be taken to manage her glaring, obvious and painful conflict of interest?

During the period covered by the inquiry, the section of the Cabinet Office where Mrs Aldred worked was pivotal in the Government's policy towards Iraq. Margaret Aldred was deputy head of that section for four and a half of those eight years. The inquiry has not published a single document originated by the Cabinet Office. In July 2002, a briefing paper by the same part of the Cabinet Office expressed the hope

“that an ultimatum could be cast in terms which Saddam would reject”.

In September 2002, Mrs Aldred's predecessor at the Cabinet Office wrote to Sir John Scarlett, then chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, suggesting that the Iraq dossier and qualifications in the original assessment were to be removed. That document was not disclosed to the Hutton inquiry and the Cabinet Office spent years trying to prevent its disclosure. In passing, I remind the House that it was Sir Gus O'Donnell who recently denied the Chilcot inquiry permission to publish the correspondence between President Bush and Mr Blair, despite the fact that both men were happy to refer to the correspondence in their respective autobiographies.

To conclude, Mrs Aldred routinely chaired the Iraq senior officials group; she met US officials in October 2008 to discuss Iraq; she was implicated in or knew of the rendition policy; she had the leaked document showing that she was copied in with respect to the rendition policy; and she flew to Washington for discussions with counterparts three weeks before the inquiry was announced. The following questions must in my view be answered. It may be difficult for the Minister to do so today, but clearly if he can write to me in due course that will suffice. I do not want to put him on the spot.

Is Mrs Margaret Aldred's role at the inquiry as central as her role in Iraq policy at the Cabinet Office? Did Sir Gus O'Donnell detail Mrs Aldred's involvement in Iraq policy precisely to Sir John Chilcot, and when she was appointed and the appointment was announced why was there no mention of her previous experience with Iraq policy? She is the gatekeeper to the inquiry. Does she advise on lines of inquiry? Does she liaise with the Government about evidence? We know that she liaises with the Government about the publication of information. Was she involved in the drawing up of the protocol that has stymied the

process? It was published a month after she took up her role. Is she likely to draft the report?

Obviously, justice must be seen to be done. Transparency and openness are paramount. They are concepts that are signally absent from the inquiry process. I regret that one conclusion that can easily be drawn is that the inquiry process is flawed and compromised from the very beginning.

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