

# The “Unnatural Death” of David Kelly, Ten Years On: A Spectacular Failure of Political Accountability

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**by Justin Schlosberg**

*Ironically, those calling for an inquest into David Kelly's death – ten years on today – base their arguments on precisely the values held so dear by professional journalists: the need for a full, impartial appraisal of the facts without fear or favour.*

Ten years after the death of intelligence analyst David Kelly, the campaign for a formal inquest wages on. Shortly before his unnatural death in 2003, Kelly was outed as the BBC news source for a controversial report suggesting the government had lied in building its case for war with Iraq earlier that year. The fact that key questions remain unasked about an official investigation into a controversial death is nothing unheard of in British politics. But the Kelly case is unique because the most vociferous opponents of due process are not officials or politicians, but journalists.

This is even more odd because the journalists who are most outspoken against campaigners hail not from the predominantly conservative red tops, but from the so-called “liberal” media comprised of the broadsheets and broadcast newsrooms. It is respected columnists and opinion editorialists – not government spokespeople – who are routinely called on to make the case against campaigners. These are not journalists who tend to shy away from attacking the government or challenging established viewpoints. Indeed, they are journalists who predicate their life's work on the unfettered scrutiny of power; who place the utmost professional value on evidence, impartiality and accuracy. Yet in relation to the cause of Kelly's death, even the evidence presented at the widely discredited Hutton Inquiry was, by the most conservative measure, conflicting. According to the official verdict, Kelly bled to death after cutting the ulnar artery in his left wrist. Yet paramedic Vanessa Hunt, the first medically trained professional to examine his body, [told](#) Hutton that

the amount of blood that was around the scene seemed relatively minimal and there was a small patch on his right knee, but no obvious arterial bleeding. There was no spraying of blood or huge blood loss or any obvious loss on the clothing [...] His jacket was pulled to sort of mid forearm area and from that area down towards the hand there was dried blood, but no obvious sign of a wound or anything, it was just dried blood.

A secondary cause of death, according to the official verdict, was that Kelly had died from a lethal overdose of painkillers. But the toxicology report showed that the level of coproximal in Kelly's blood was less than a third of what would normally be considered fatal and less than one pill was actually found in his stomach contents. Yet this kind of evidence remains elusive to journalists who continue to circulate assumptions [disguised as facts](#): namely that

Kelly swallowed 29 tablets based solely on a blister pack of 30 found on his person with only one tablet left (and incidentally, none of Kelly's fingerprints).

What about Kelly's state of mind? At the Hutton Inquiry, we heard expert witness testimony that he was acutely depressed over a supposed life's work in ruins and ravaged by the shame of having breached the civil service code. But that testimony was provided by a consultant psychiatrist who had never actually met Kelly, let alone interacted with him during his final days and hours. It was based in large part on that of other witnesses, including Kelly's close family. While they had spoken of him as "withdrawn" and "subdued", this was primarily in the context of the period leading up to his appearance before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee on 14 July 2003. Following that, Kelly's daughter and son-in-law, with whom he was staying at the time, described his demeanour repeatedly as "normal", "calm", "relaxed", "relieved", and eating and sleeping "very well" right up to the day of his disappearance. [According to his sister](#) (pdf), Sarah Pape, who spoke to Kelly by telephone two days before his death:

In my line of work I do deal with people who may have suicidal thoughts and I ought to be able to spot those, even on a telephone conversation. But I have gone over and over in my mind the two conversations we had and he certainly did not betray to me any impression that he was anything other than tired. He certainly did not convey to me that he was feeling depressed; and absolutely nothing that would have alerted me to the fact that he might have been considering suicide.

Of course, such testimony does not prove that Kelly did not commit suicide, any more than conflicting testimony proves that he did. But in the week following Hutton's report, BBC and ITN journalists cited [evidence](#) that Kelly was suicidal no less than seven times in news reports without any qualification or caveat and without once mentioning evidence to the contrary.

For any journalist genuinely concerned with 'the facts', it would have been clear from the outset that the only thing we know in relation to this case is that we don't know how Kelly died. It is possible that he did die in the way Hutton said he died (albeit extremely unlikely according to mainstream medical opinion), and that conflicting evidence was the result of random anomalies; just as it is possible that Kelly was murdered, with or without the connivance of elements within the British state. The point is that no cause of death has been established on the basis of likely probability, let alone beyond reasonable doubt.

But there is something else we know which is that there has been unprecedented misinformation, obstruction of justice and on-going suppression of information in relation to this case. Only around a quarter of the police documents submitted to Hutton have been published and much of the remaining evidence has been sealed under an extraordinarily high level of classification for 70 years. It includes medical reports, photographs of the body and supplementary witness statements. The justification for this enduring secrecy is to prevent undue distress to the bereaved. But David Kelly was a public servant who suffered an unnatural death in extremely controversial circumstances. In far less controversial cases, the interests of the bereaved never outweigh that of the public interest in having a formal coroner's inquest into an unnatural death.

With occasional and notable exceptions, journalists' persistent refusal to engage with the substance of this controversy reveals a blind spot in our system of democratic

accountability, encapsulated by the label of “conspiracy theory”. This taboo, which operates within journalist and academic circles alike, has some sound basis. It discriminates against conjecture often associated with tabloid sensationalism or internet subcultures that respond to secrecy or uncertainty with unfounded reasoning. This kind of theorizing has also provided the foundation for racist and extremist ideology upon which acts of terror, genocide and ethnic cleansing have been predicated.

Such a cautionary approach, however, has led to an outright rejection of the idea that particular groups of powerful people might make, in the words of terrorism expert Jeffrey Bale, [“a concerted effort to keep an illegal or unethical act or situation from being made public”](#). Yet both historical precedent and contemporary events suggest that such instances are a regular feature of real-world politics. The Chilcott Inquiry into the Iraq War, for instance, has surfaced considerable evidence that the decision to invade Iraq was taken in secret and long before it was publicly announced and justified on what turned out to be false intelligence. The problem amounts to an “intellectual resistance” with the result that “an entire dimension of political history and contemporary politics has been consistently neglected” (Bale 1995).

Ironically, those calling for an inquest into David Kelly’s death – ten years on today – base their arguments on precisely the values held so dear by professional journalists: the need for a full, impartial appraisal of the facts without fear or favour. The baseless conjecture associated with conspiracy theory, on the other hand, characterizes precisely the way in which most journalists have approached this case. Above all, it is the enduring silence of newsrooms which has shielded successive governments from pressure for an inquest or from challenge to their persistent refusals to hold one.

The fires of injustice rage unabated. It took a lot longer than ten years for the relatives of Stephen Lawrence, Bloody Sunday and Hillsborough victims to get some semblance of accountability from the state. For the relatives of Daniel Morgan, the victims of the Iraq War, Lockerbie, secret rendition and torture, the struggle continues. If nothing else, campaigners for an inquest into David Kelly’s death have succeeded in drawing some attention to yet another spectacular failure of British justice.

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