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Chilcot Report

Sir William Patey KCMG

Nearly seven years since he first began his inquiry Sir John Chilcot has finally issued his comprehensive and definitive [report](#). It is hard to argue with his main conclusions; that the UK chose to go to war and not as a last resort; that judgments about the WMD were presented with a certainty that was not justified; that the consequences of going to war were underestimated and therefore planning was inadequate; and that the Government failed to achieve its stated objectives. No one has time to read all 14 volumes or the 2.6 million words, but the nearly 200-page executive summary is clear, forthright and balanced.

Whilst he concluded that the circumstances in which it was ultimately decided that there was a legal basis for UK participation were far from satisfactory, he does not say there was no legal justification for going to war. He leaves that to those more qualified to judge. The report highlights the dichotomy of trying to reconcile the UK objective of disarming Iraq, if possible by peaceful means, and the US aim of regime change. Post 9/11, there was little US patience for a containment policy that was withering on the vine. The failure in the summer of 2001 to get the Russians on board for “smarter sanctions” was the backdrop to the new Neo Con US Administration’s response to 9/11. By the end of 2001 there was no US appetite for a failing containment policy.

The conclusion that Chilcot reaches is that there was no need to go to war when we did as Iraq did not represent an imminent threat. More time could have been given to pursue the UN option. His conclusion that “the timing of military action was entirely driven by the US Administration” is indisputable.

In an emotional statement in response to the Report, Tony Blair apologised for some of the failures but stuck to his guns on the main decision to support the US. He sought to remind us of the context, with Saddam having represented the biggest threat to the region prior to 2003 and his fear that an unscrupulous regime with access to weapons of mass destruction might facilitate their acquisition by terrorists. He made a plea for those who disagree with his decision to accept that he made it in good faith.

The UK Prime Minister, in his statement to the House of Commons on 6 July, said that many of the lessons highlighted by Chilcot had already been learnt. The establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) in which all the relevant Cabinet Ministers and intelligence chiefs are represented, meant

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that decision making by a small group of people with little incentive or opportunity to challenge would no longer be possible – a bold claim.

Jeremy Corbyn, the Leader of the Opposition (for now at least), called for a War Powers Act that would oblige future governments to seek approval from parliament for any military action. It should be remembered that parliament did vote in favour of military action in Iraq. Given the unwritten nature of the UK constitution and the importance of convention it is unlikely that any PM will feel able to commit combat troops without explicit parliamentary approval, as we saw over Syria.

There is still a lot to digest in the full Chilcot Report but whatever lessons we may or may not learn, the tragedy of Iraq continues without any real prospect of improvement over the coming years. The future viability of the Iraqi state, as presently constituted, remains in doubt. This is the real legacy of the invasion.

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