

Blair at Chilcot: 'The Superbowl of Self-Justification'

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No Regrets

Tony Blair's resolute, unchanging, self-affirming [appearance at the impotent Chilcot Inquiry](#) reminded us of the Politician's Virility Dilemma. If they change their minds or admit fault then they are seen as weak. If they stick to their guns they are seen as strong but wrong. We in the media and the public can enjoy 20-20 hindsight while those who make history are doomed to live in it.

As [Paul Staines](#) so crisply put it, the [Chilcot Inquiry](#) will change nothing and nobody will change their minds. Indeed, "for the political classes [the Blair hearing at Chilcott] is the Super-Bowl of political self-justification."

Of course, many journalists and voters have changed their minds about the invasion of Iraq. Or at least, there has been a remarkable re-framing of the story. It is often ignored that at the time just about everyone thought it likely that Saddam had WMD – that wasn't really the issue. The argument was over what to do about it. And the real damage was done not by the invasion but the aftermath. I don't remember anyone talking about that at the time, though now everyone claims they knew we were unprepared for the Post-Saddam situation.

Likewise, the detail of the dodgy dossier. We obsess about particular lines now but at the time it was a small part of a much wider campaign to convince the public and MPs. If anything, the government was hoist by the petard of its excessive attempts to provide empirical evidence when what was at stake was a political and military issue not a factual problem.

One of the most convincing critics of Blair is Whitehall scholar [Peter Hennessy](#) who has shown how this was a failure of the 'process' of government and leadership rather than some moral crime. Cabinet government dissolved, the party machine broke down and Whitehall collapsed. I think that version is about right and it reflects more generally on the problems with British political administration at present. We have both inefficient and undemocratic governance.

The media also stands accused of failing to spot the lack of evidence for the war and not challenging the Government's case. This is patently not true. Go back to the time and you see massive coverage of the anti-war demonstrations and regular peace-nic editorial across the press and especially in the Independent, Guardian and Mirror. Likewise, there were journalists such as David Aaronovitch who effectively campaigned for the invasion as an act of liberal interventionism, not lapdog obedience to the Bush White House.

And how much can the media do anyway?

I was at Channel 4 News at the time and our diplomatic editor Lindsey Hilsum spent many weeks [touring around Iraq](#) trying to find the WMD evidence in situ. I remember how puzzled Lindsey was when I spoke to her on the phone from our London newsroom about the story. Most of the experts, diplomats and politicians were saying that there were nasty things lurking in hangers or bunkers somewhere in the Iraqi desert. But what she saw on the ground told a different story.

As she explains in a [very good article](#) about her coverage, it took even a great journalist like Lindsey a long while to work out that there was no threat from WMD – and by then it was too late.

And of course some of us took different views at different times.

Of course, a good journalist should be able to change his mind and should always seek to ask critical questions

from every ideological vantage point. I remember sitting next to Jon Snow to watch Colin Powell at the UN giving the speech that convinced the world that Saddam had WMDs. (That speech was, of course, far more important than the Dodgy Dossier, but that is just another reminder of how London-centric the chattering classes are when they consider history). Jon was very anti-Bush and anti-War but he (and I) were convinced by what Powell said. That didn't stop Snow later going on to get one of the key scoops showing how we were misled over the Intelligence in the UK.



Lindsey Hilsum In Iraq

In the end politicians are the suspension system for our society. They have to ease the ride for the public over the bumps in the road of events. They have to constantly adjust their views to allow for changing circumstance. Politicians are supposed to drive the vehicle of state in an agreed direction, but we are happy for them to take a short cut or two without telling us. We citizens sit in the back of the car and don't want to be thrown

around all the time. As long as we get there – who cares? With Iraq it is clear that all of us – not just our driver – have been involved in a rather nasty little accident.

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