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Chilcot Inquiry: Mandarins take revenge on Tony Blair over Iraq

Civil servants and diplomats are lining up to stick a knife into former PM's reputation

- [Toby Helm](#) and [Rajeev Syal](#)
- [The Observer](#), Sunday 29 November 2009
- Whitehall mandarins are supreme masters of subtle evasion. But they do not rise to the top of their trade without also knowing how to stick in the knife.

At times the Chilcot inquiry into Britain's involvement in Iraq since 2001, which opened last week, resembled a gentlemen's club moved to the sanitised surroundings of the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in Westminster.

Oxbridge-educated pillars of the establishment politely questioned other Oxbridge-educated pillars of the establishment about who said what to whom in which memo. The inquiry is a peculiar mixture of the old and the new, the open and closed. It is conducted in the language of Whitehall, yet beamed live by webcam to the world.

Critics are convinced that, for all Sir John Chilcot's promises to the contrary, it will turn out to be another Whitehall whitewash. For the cognoscenti, little new information has yet emerged, and when the final report is written it will not seek to apportion blame. Yet beneath the equivocation and mandarin-speak, Whitehall seems, in as much as it knows how, to be using Chilcot to wield the scalpel. Throughout the first week the pent-up frustrations of diplomats and career civil servants over the way [Tony Blair](#) and George Bush secretly plotted to oust Saddam Hussein, bypassing the "official channels" in which they operate, has been there for all to see. Chilcot is said to have been warned by his Whitehall friends that many witnesses will be ready to unburden themselves – finally to take revenge. In session after session they have appeared to do that. Blair's reputation has been sliced like salami day after day.

Sir William Ehrman, the Foreign Office's former director of international security, volunteered last Wednesday that the threat from Saddam's supposed weapons of mass destruction was known to be limited.

In the gentlest way he drove in the dagger. "We did, I think on 10 March [2003], get a report that chemical weapons might have remained disassembled and Saddam hadn't yet ordered their assembly. There was a suggestion that Iraq might lack warheads capable of effective dispersal of agents."

Ever the diplomat, however, Ehrman went on to say that the intelligence warnings had not made any difference to the case for war. "I don't think it invalidated the point about the programmes he had. It was more about use," he said. But he had set the tone.

On Thursday, Sir Christopher Meyer, UK ambassador in Washington from 1997 to 2003, who has already criticised the government over Iraq in his memoirs, went for Blair, mercilessly comparing his qualities as a war leader to those of Margaret Thatcher. "I'm not trying to make a party political point here whatsoever, but quite often I think about this: what would Margaret Thatcher have done?" Meyer asked. "I think she would have insisted on a coherent political and diplomatic strategy and she would have demanded the greatest clarity about what the heck happened if, and when, you removed Saddam Hussein."

A former press secretary to John Major who can speak like a mandarin but, equally, can talk like a layman, he said Blair had failed miserably to extract a price from George Bush for his loyalty. "We could have achieved more by playing a tougher role... if, for example... Tony Blair had said: 'I want to help you, George, on this, but I have to say, in all honesty, that I will not be able to take part in any military operation unless we have palpable progress on the [Middle East] peace process and we have absolute clarity on what happens in Iraq if it comes up.' I think that would have changed the nature – it would not have led to a rupture – it would have changed the nature of American planning."

Even when defending UK policy, he was on the offensive. Asked if policy had been adapted to stay in line with Washington's, Meyer added: "I wouldn't say it was as extremely poodle-ish as that."

On Friday, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Britain's former ambassador to the United Nations, told Chilcot he had threatened to resign in 2002 if at least one security council resolution was not passed. He added: "I regard our participation in the military action in Iraq in March 2003 as legal but of questionable legitimacy, in that it did

not have the democratically observable backing of the great majority of [UN] member states, or even perhaps of the majority of people inside the UK."

Today new arguments are raging over whether the inquiry will have access to, and publish, the most sensitive documents – including legal advice given to the government by the former attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, during the lead-up to war. Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader, has written to Gordon Brown saying that, unless all such material is published, the inquiry will be a sham and the public's sense that it has been denied the facts will remain.

But it will still be essential viewing nonetheless. This week will see more key witnesses. The most revealing testimony could come tomorrow when Sir David Manning, Blair's former foreign policy adviser, is certain to be asked about his authorship of a memo which purportedly revealed details of a secret meeting between Bush and Blair in January 2003. According to reports, the five pages of secret documents, known as the Manning memo, recorded the White House meeting on 31 January which allegedly shows that Bush and Blair made a deal to carry out an invasion regardless of whether weapons of mass destruction were discovered by UN weapons inspectors. It appears to be in direct contradiction with statements that Blair made to parliament afterwards that Saddam would be given a final chance to disarm.

The memo also disclosed that Bush floated the idea of painting a U-2 spyplane in UN colours and letting it fly low over Iraq to provoke Saddam into ordering it to be shot down, providing a pretext for the subsequent invasion by America and Britain.

Manning, educated at Oriel College, Oxford, and a career diplomat, is fiercely independent. He may choose to say more than Blair would like, according to one former colleague. He could also be asked to either confirm or deny Meyer's evidence that Meyer received "new instructions" in early 2005 indicating that it was a "complete waste of time" to oppose regime change, so strong was the US determination to go down that road.

On Tuesday, Edward Chaplin, the Foreign Office Middle East director at the time of the invasion, and Sir Peter Ricketts, the top official in the Foreign Office, will appear. Ricketts, a former chairman of Britain's powerful joint intelligence committee, has already given evidence to the inquiry alleging that officials in London knew even before Bush came to office in 2001 that there were "voices" in Washington calling for Saddam to be removed from power. Ricketts also told the inquiry that, until March 2002, Whitehall distanced itself from regime change. Only one month later, Blair told Bush that he would support military action "to bring about regime change".

According to documents leaked five years ago, Ricketts described the US in 2002 as "scrambling to establish a link between Iraq and al-Qaida" – a connection that was "so far, frankly unconvincing". On Thursday, Sir Kevin Tebbit, the Ministry of Defence's permanent secretary during the invasion, will be asked to give evidence about the military planning. Chilcot will, most likely, want to know when the government first began to amass resources for the war and what, if any, preparations were made for the aftermath of an invasion. Tebbit could also be urged to divulge the level of intelligence he received on the likelihood of an attack with chemical or biological weapons.

After Tebbit, a succession of heavy-hitting military men will give evidence. The former chief of the defence staff, Admiral the Lord Boyce, could be asked whether he believes that the invasion was legal. On Friday, Lieutenant General Sir Anthony Pigott, former deputy chief of the defence staff, and Major General David Wilson, senior British military adviser to the US military's central command between 2002 and 2003, will be questioned about military planning for the conflict.

The last witness to appear this week will be Dominic Asquith, Britain's ambassador to Iraq between 2006 and 2007, who will come armed with knowledge of the view from Baghdad.

When Chilcot has made his way through the officials, he will turn in the new year to former ministers, including Jack Straw, the former foreign secretary, and Blair himself. The panel has said that it will also begin to examine the highly controversial issue of whether the invasion was legal – which may turn out to be the focal point of the whole inquiry – in January.

In his final report, which is not expected until late 2010 at the earliest, Chilcot has said he will not seek to attribute blame. But after only one week it is already clear where much of Whitehall believes that lies.

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