

Blair on the Rocks

While the Hutton Inquiry distracts attention from Iraq's appalling realities, it's findings will contribute to Blair's downfall in the longterm, argues Rory Palmer

Media hyperbole has elevated the Hutton Inquiry to an absurd status. Now it's perceived as an analysis of the government's wider legitimacy, which is fundamentally wrong. Hutton's findings may well produce some biting criticisms of Downing Street's inner-workings and the Ministry of Defence's personnel procedures. Beyond this, the inquiry has done exactly what the government wanted it to do, merely serving to divert public attention away from the real situation in Iraq.

The inquiry is little more than a fanfare of illustrious barristers pumping up lucrative bills, many of which will be sapped from the public purse. It's simply more about personalities than it is politics. The political, and moral, failures of the government in going to war have been conveniently sidestepped. The death of Dr David Kelly was of course a harrowing and saddening consequence of this decision. The Ministry of Defence's response to the Kelly-Gilligan episode could well have been more sensitive. But let's not forget why all this is happening. This charade is all about the so-called dodgy dossier into Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programme, or lack thereof.

The fact is that no weapons of mass destruction have been located in Iraq despite the fact that the US-UK coalition have had free-run of the country that they are occupying for almost five months. The fact that no weapons of mass destruction have been found provides a chilling verdict on Blair's decision to go to war, a damning intimation of his government.

The prospect of Blair leaving Number 10 is still a dream that many will have to live with a while

Iraq is under a brutal military occupation with a social infrastructure, including water systems and medical facilities, that has been decimated. Iraqi protesters demonstrating against the US-UK occupation are locked up or shot by the occupying forces. There is little sign of the serious steps to creating a democratic system of governance in Iraq that has been repeatedly promised by the Bush-Blair axis. The UN and the global aid agencies cannot leave Iraq fast enough with very real concerns over their security escalating by the day and

illustrated most pointedly by the death of the UN's special representative to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello in August.

This reality is a disgrace. But with all the commotion surrounding the almost pointless Hutton Inquiry, the day-to-day outrage in Iraq has been banished from the mainstream media agenda. Hutton's conclusions are rather predictable. The government, the Ministry of Defence and Andrew Gilligan and the BBC will all be criticised. Andrew Gilligan and Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon will probably lose their jobs.

So what? The fact remains that Geoff Hoon should lose his job regardless. Not because an official under his charge was driven to suicide, but because Hoon has been responsible, on a daily basis, for executing the debacle in Iraq.

Hoon's imminent departure from the Cabinet will be a further blow to Blair. This summer has seen some of his most trusted colleagues leave government. Alan Milburn, a staunch Blairite, departed to lead a 'normal life'.

Alistair Campbell has of course resigned. His exit from Number Ten will leave a void that cannot be filled; this is the biggest blow to Blair. Having partnered him for the entirety of his senior political career, the Prime Minister will undoubtedly feel isolated without his most trusted companion. This isolation will be felt most not in the aftermath of Hutton and its

probable findings but as the parliamentary programme resumes.

Blair will be faced with a series of back-bench revolts. Issues such as top-up fees and foundation hospitals should see many back-benches revolt against the extension of Thatcherism into Labour's programme. Of course, such revolts will make news. But what is more notable is the characters who could lead these revolts.

Former Health Secretary Frank Dobson has already squared up to Blair over foundation hospitals. Robin Cook has continually challenged the Prime Minister over Iraq, recently speaking of his regret at not doing more to avert the government from war. Clare Short has called for Blair to resign, though the cowardly timing of her resignation rightly taints her stance. Former transport minister Glenda Jackson is also vocal in her rejection Blair's policy. These former ministers and the usual suspects on Labour's left are queuing up to lead revolts to begin to dislodge Blair from the helm.

The autumn will inevitably be dominated by the publication of Hutton's findings. Undoubtedly, they will rock the establishment but in the wider picture it can only form part of a wider challenge to the Prime Minister's legitimacy; the prospect of Blair leaving Number 10 is still a delusion that many will have to live with for some time yet.

However, Blair's protection has always been provided by the clinical abilities of Alistair Campbell. He will not be around in the autumn. Campbell's political judgement is assumed to be infallible. If anyone knows the right time to leave a sinking ship he does. So the question remains: has he left the Prime Minister swimming or heading for a Titanical finale?



Anti-war protests at the Hutton Inquiry keep the pressure on Blair

Labour Crushed in Brent East

James Redgrave on Brent East and the Lib Dem's challenge to the beleaguered Blair

Charles Kennedy's response to the Lib Dem's landmark by-election was uncharacteristically aggressive from a man usually seen as a genteel representative of British politics. "Last year, I said it was a realistic ambition for us to start overtaking the Conservatives in British politics. This year, be in no doubt - we are overtaking the Conservatives. Be in no doubt - we are the only credible challenge to the Government." His warning, while worthy of Tory attention, was just as much a shot across the bows of New Labour.

Critics of Kennedy and the party that he represents are already laying down their cynical dismissals of Brent East's significance. Labour Chair Ian McCartney accused Sarah Teather of making "empty promises" that "cannot be kept", while the view propagated by many is that her success is symptomatic of the lack of confidence in Blair, a Labour ailment soon to be remedied. There is some truth in that. Blair in particular, has rarely, if ever, been less popular. And it's difficult to envisage Kennedy's crew scoring such a hit before Iraq but does that necessarily make this red rose misfortune transient?

On the one hand Labour did "bounce back" (McCartney's prediction, following the election defeat) from the 2000 petrol protests, the only comparable period in New Labour's history. At that time it was the Tories on Blair's back but they failed to

make good on their gains and received an even more humiliating defeat in 2001 than 1997.

Times have changed and so has the Labour party, both internally and in the eyes of the electorate. The fuel crisis was an isolated event marring an otherwise unspectacular, but well received, term. Since 2001 the government has been perceived to have struck out on more than one occasion. Two wars have polarised their supporters into largely unreconcilable 'pro' and 'anti' cores and the backlash from the Iraq conflict has focused on sleaze, misinformation and betrayal: the factors responsible for crippling Conservative dominance in the 1990's. Furthermore the increased dissatisfaction has created a demand for more pronounced successes in the bread and butter areas of politics. The old staples of NHS reform, crime, public transport are back on the agenda. Success in these areas had previously been acceptably incremental; now they're subject to more scrutiny.

The truth is that Blair is unlikely to be able to breeze through this next term reliant on a general perception of his party as the lesser of two evils. Now a third party, previously flirting with influence from political no mans land, has moved up a gear and is seen

by increasing numbers as even less evil again. New Labour have never been so un-savvy as to consistently upset the electorate, until now, and the Lib Dems have caught both them and the Tories in a worse state of malady than either party has experienced in decades. It probably is not yet time for Kennedy

and co to go home and prepare for government but his pugnacious statement quoted previously holds truth, they can and may replace the Tories in official opposition and perhaps mount that "credible challenge" which our elections have lacked.



A credible challenge to Blair? Sarah Teather and Charles Kennedy celebrate success