DEADLY DECISIONS

How the UK Parliament voted for war against Iraq: Lessons learned 20 years later

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On 18 March 2003, the UK House of Commons approved military intervention in Iraq. This vote for UK military deployment was hugely significant for four reasons. First, it had a devastating impact on Iraq and the Middle East. Second, it signalled the emergence of a political convention to grant Parliament a veto over deployment decisions, even though the legal right to do so remains with the Prime Minister under the Royal Prerogative. Third, the decision had a negative impact on UK relations with the Arab world that continues to this day. And finally, it has cast a shadow over all subsequent debates on UK interventions accompanied by a worrying level of public distrust in government over intelligence related to such interventions.

As an advocacy group committed to promoting peaceful relations between the UK and the Middle East, Caabu believes it is crucial we understand how MPs made their decision and the influences that shaped their vote on the Iraq intervention. For this policy brief, published on the 20th anniversary of the vote, we interviewed a cross-section of MPs, former MPs and Lords who took part in the vote, from across the political spectrum, to include those who voted for, against, and abstained. We were additionally interested in how this vote influenced a new generation of MPs, so we also interviewed some MPs that joined the Commons after 2003. Experts on Iraq were also consulted. The questions that drove this research were:

- How interventions are considered in Parliament.
- What persuaded MPs to vote in a particular way.
- What kinds of knowledge on these issues were offered to MPs; did they feel sufficiently briefed?
- How did MPs feel about their votes now, with the benefit of hindsight? How has it influenced, if at all, how MPs think of deploying the UK military?
- How do MPs feel about the Royal Prerogative i.e., the ability of a government to declare war without parliamentary approval? Should parliamentary approval be mandatory?
- What parliamentary mechanisms could be adopted to improve the understanding of overseas interventions for a more informed debate?
- If you were not an MP at the time, what do you think of the Iraq vote, and how has it influenced you?

War is a devastating force that leaves a lasting impact on individuals and societies. The impact of war can be seen in the widespread loss of life, the destruction of infrastructure, ecological damage, the displacement of civilians, and widespread suffering and trauma. These impacts can be felt across generations; countries do not recover quickly from war.

The Iraq War had a profound impact on the country and its people. Two decades after the US-UK led invasion, Iraq continues to face significant challenges in terms of political instability, security, economic development, and social cohesion.

Decisions to go to war must seriously consider the consequences of such action. The aim of this policy brief is to examine ways in which future debates and votes can be aided to ensure that Parliament can be more effective when faced with these difficult and deadly decisions.

The vote for war in Iraq

On 18 March 2003, the UK House of Commons approved military intervention in Iraq. In the face of critical media commentary, the largest street protests ever across the UK, and hostility within its own party, the New Labour government proposed and supported a motion to commit British troops to invade Iraq as part of Coalition Forces led by the US. The motion charged that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in contravention of UN Security Council resolutions and was not complying with UN weapons inspectors. UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, addressed the House in a passionate and highly persuasive speech about the need to act against the Iraqi Ba'athist government led by President Saddam Hussein.

The Commons debate went on for 10 hours, two votes were taken, and MPs voted in favour of military action 412 to 149. The government won the vote despite a rebellion from its own backbenchers as well as the opposition of Liberal Democrat and nationalist MPs, thanks to nearly unanimous support from the Conservatives. One Labour MP (who preferred to remain nameless) said: "It was clear to me that Tony Blair had made a decision and he was desperately trying to sell it to his parliamentary party and to all the MPs in Parliament. And in many ways, it was an easier job to sell it to the Conservatives than it was to many of my colleagues. The evidence wasn't compelling enough. And it wasn't reliable enough. And that's where we were suspicious."

MPs we spoke to describe the Commons vote to send British forces to Iraq as the most difficult they have ever had to make. It certainly was the most contentious of Blair's premiership.

What happened after the vote?

Less than 24 hours after the House of Commons vote, the US-led Coalition Forces launched an air invasion of Iraq, followed the next day by a ground invasion: 29,199 bombs were dropped and 160,000 troops (a quarter of which were British) were deployed. Intense media coverage ensured these "shock and awe" military tactics were watched worldwide. In less than a month, the government of Iraq collapsed, its military was defeated, and the capital city, Baghdad, was captured and occupied on 9 April. Overall, the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq had a profound impact on the country and the region, with far-reaching humanitarian, social and political consequences, which continue to be felt today.

Why the vote was significant

The 2003 vote on the Iraq War was the first time the government sought prior approval from the British Parliament for going to war. Before that, every government had used the Royal Prerogative including the Falklands War (1982), the First Gulf War (1991), and Kosovo (1999). Under the Royal Prerogative powers, a government can declare war and deploy armed forces without the backing or consent of Parliament. However, under pressure, the government allowed Parliament a vote before the Iraq war.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem, then Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs spokesperson, told us that Prime Minister Blair had to seek Parliamentary approval in 2003 because of the massive public concerns over war. "There would certainly have been a huge undermining of any authority that he [Blair] ever had if he had ignored the quite remarkable public support for the negative position. It was an occasion when the public led the Parliament, of that I'm in no doubt."

Ever since the 2003 vote, an informal convention has developed that the government should seek approval from Parliament before taking military action or at least as soon as possible after military action has commenced.

Such a change in convention was inevitable according to politicians we interviewed.

One Labour MP (who preferred to remain nameless) said: "It's time we established the rights of citizenship. And I think part of that means that you've got to have far greater checks and balances on the supremacy of

the Prime Minister to adopt the Royal Prerogative, without any accountability to anybody."

Under the Royal Prerogative, a Prime Minister can take decisions with minimum scrutiny, arguably leading to poor decision-making processes. But if compelled to seek Parliamentary approval, a Prime Minister has to be well prepared with clear justifications for action, an argument former Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, has made.[1]

If a Prime Minister has to prepare more to win a parliamentary vote, Parliament needs to prepare effectively to hold the Executive to account. This is a burden and a responsibility. Parliamentary debate and a vote for war should be an opportunity to test the case for war and scrutinise the preparations for military operations. Parliamentary backing for any government's plans for war provides reassurance to the armed forces knowing that there is broad-based political support for military action. It also demonstrates that the Executive and Legislature are in agreement, sending a powerful message to both allies and opponents.

Was the invasion legal?

The legality of the military action remains a topic of debate. The US, the UK, and their allies, argue that the invasion was justified under international law based on the argument that Iraq was in breach of UN Security Council resolutions related to WMD and posed a threat to international peace and security. However, critics argue that the invasion violated the UN Charter, which prohibits the use of force except in self-defence or with authorisation from the UN Security Council.

The debates in the UN Security Council were intense with the US and the UK pushing for a new resolution authorising the use of force against Iraq. Other member states, including France, Russia, and China, argued for continued weapons inspections and a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

In the end, the US and the UK did not receive explicit authorisation from the UN Security Council to use force, but they argued that previous resolutions (particularly UN Security Council Resolution 1441, passed in November 2002) provided a legal basis for the invasion.

Crucially, in January 2003, the UK Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, advised the UK government that a second UN Security Council resolution was required for the invasion to be legal, but then changed his legal view in March. Goldsmith's change in advice was an important factor in persuading MPs to vote in favour of UK military deployment. However, the question of whether the invasion was legal or not is still a matter of contention and dispute.

The geopolitical context

The geopolitical context was the US's "global war on terror" launched after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 ("9/11") and its designation of Iraq as being part of an "axis of evil" along with Iran and North Korea. There was also the historical legacy of the 1990-91 Gulf War ("Operation Desert Storm"), triggered by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. After it was forced to withdraw from Kuwait, Iraq was subjected to more than a decade of international sanctions, plus UN weapons inspections that led to the destruction of its chemical weapons and an end to its programme to develop WMD. The sanctions caused widespread civilian harm and were subsequently regarded to be one of the causes of the rapid collapse of the Iraqi state after the 2003 invasion. UN weapons inspections were restarted in 2002 due to the charge that Hussein's regime was defying UN Security Council resolutions and trying once again to develop WMD.

It is clear the US was determined to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Driven by its strategic interests in the Middle East, including securing access to oil resources, protecting key allies, and advancing its foreign policy goals, the US used its "global war on terror" to justify military intervention and regime change in Iraq. The US's official position was that the Iraqi government possessed WMD, had ties to terrorist groups (including Al

1 House of Lords Constitution Committee (2006) 'Waging War: Parliament's Role and Responsibility', London: The Stationery Office, p.19.

Qaeda), and was a destabilising force in the region. Subsequent investigations found no evidence of WMD in Iraq and questioned the validity of the alleged ties between Saddam Hussein's regime and terrorist groups, particularly Al Qaeda.

Why did the UK government support a war against Iraq?

There were several reasons why the UK government supported an invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Ba'athist government.

The first, and publicly stated, reason was that UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, believed that Saddam Hussein's regime posed a threat to international security, due to its alleged possession of WMD and its history of aggressive behaviour to its neighbours as well as its own minorities and dissidents. Removing him from power was seen as an important step to prevent the proliferation of WMD and promote stability in the region. WMD was presented as the main motive for intervention and was the basis upon which many MPs voted in favour of UK deployment. Many MPs we spoke to believed that Blair was convinced of this. Conservative MP Crispin Blunt stated: "It never occurred to me for a minute that Blair wasn't convinced that weapons of mass destruction were there. And we were going to find them. And on that basis, he was therefore recommending going to war."

Another important factor was that Blair considered preserving and advancing the UK's "special relationship" with the US to be a key foreign policy priority and had fostered a strong personal friendship with President George W. Bush. This relationship was regarded, by some MPs, from across the political spectrum, as problematic. The former Foreign Office Minister, Lord Hain, felt that: "He [Blair] allowed himself to be sort of persuaded by the importance of standing alongside the Americans, rather than taking a more Harold Wilson type position on the Vietnam War." Many MPs, particularly from Labour and the Lib-Dems, were uncomfortable with the Bush narrative which had identified Iraq as an enemy of the US. "Tony Blair had sort of committed Britain to stand shoulder to shoulder with the USA, onwards from 9/11," said Labour MP Richard Burden.

This was supplemented by Blair's advocacy for "liberal interventionism", which proposed using both diplomatic and military means to promote democracy and international security. Often referred to as the "Chicago Doctrine" after Blair's much-celebrated April 1999 speech to the Chicago Economic Club, these beliefs had underpinned Blair's support for intervention in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. For some MPs, this doctrine created the context for the Blair government to disregard crucial tenets of international law and justify sidestepping the authority of the UN Security Council.

The debate on going to war in Iraq was extensive given that this lasted over a period of many months. The focus of much of the debate however was on the issue of WMD, the weapons inspectors and their role and, in the latter part, the legality of any war.

What affected MPs' decisions

MPs cite varying reasons for why they voted the way they did. Many who had doubts decided to trust the judgement of the Prime Minister. Blair spoke with conviction and clarity. Some have told Caabu that they felt nervous about joining the likes of George Galloway and Tam Dalyell in the 'No Lobby' as they were deemed to be fringe figures. Others voted against the war in part because of a distrust of the administration of President Bush and the hard-line neo-conservatives surrounding him. Even if they trusted Blair, they could not trust the likes of Paul Wolfowitz, John Bolton and Richard Perle. A lot of MPs feared the agenda that the Bush administration was pursuing went far beyond just ridding Iraq of WMD and a brutal regime.

The debate on the war in Iraq took place in a fevered atmosphere. No decision to go to war has triggered such a nationwide split. Early on, the debate became one between pro-war and anti-war blocs. The pro-war bloc tended to emphasise the brutality of the Saddam Hussein regime and underplay the impact of UN sanctions. The anti-war bloc emphasised the impact of UN sanctions but often underplayed the brutality of the regime. MPs at the time expressed private fears that voting against the war might appear as if they endorsed the behaviour of the Iraqi regime.

In this atmosphere, a nuanced evidence-based debate about the implications of war was increasingly impossible. Few made the argument that both the sanctions were flawed and counterproductive, but also that the Iraqi regime's record was appalling. The anti-war movement frequently did not propose measures on how to deal with a regime that had been a consistent threat to its neighbours and the Iraqi people and had used chemical weapons. The pro-war movement tended to ignore the impact of war and sanctions on the Iraqi people.

Other important factors included the use of the "three-line whip", which means you must vote according to your party's recommendation or face potential expulsion, and the threat of the fall of the government.

Despite these threats, 121 Labour MPs still voted against the war. One Labour MP (who preferred to remain nameless) said: "I was summoned to the Chief Whip's office a couple of days before we're asked to vote. I was told, you do realise that if this vote fails, which it was never going to fail because the Tories were on side, then Tony Blair will ask for an immediate dissolution and a general election, and you won't be a Labour candidate if you voted against."

There is little doubt that the threat of a government defeat convinced many MPs who were wavering to vote in favour. Said the former Foreign Office Minister, Lord Hain: "A lot of people, out of conscience and principle, adopted more the Robin Cook position. But, in the end, were persuaded against their best instincts to support the government because they didn't want to defeat the prime minister, and they thought it would bring him down, and they thought it could bring the government down."

Some MPs and experts that spoke to Caabu expressed the opinion that votes for military deployment should not be subject to a "three-line whip" but allowed as a free (or unwhipped) vote, i.e., permitting MPs to vote according to their own personal conscience.

The "dodgy dossier"

The role of British intelligence has been the subject of ongoing criticism and controversy, with many arguing that the decision to go to war was based on flawed and misleading information. The September 2002 government briefing paper (sometimes known as the "dodgy dossier") has been criticised, particularly the claim that Iraq's chemical and biological weapons could be launched within 45 minutes of an order from the Iraqi president. A subsequent government briefing paper in February 2003 was later found to have been substantially plagiarised from internet sources and withdrawn.

The "dodgy dossier", and the influence it had on MPs' votes, had a profound effect on the UK public's trust in the British intelligence services.[2] Reflecting on this, Labour MP Richard Burden, said: "There was a loss of trust there. The debate had been about whether or not weapons of mass destruction of Saddam was going to reach wherever in 45 minutes. To find out that, actually, they didn't exist anywhere fundamentally sapped trust. It forever defined Tony Blair's premiership after that, probably unfairly."

Whilst it would be challenging to allow widespread Parliamentary access to classified intelligence, it could be possible to broaden the circle not least through permitting the appropriate select committees more access to sensitive information. The powers of these select committees could be increased.

Poor parliamentary understanding of Iraq and the region

Given that MPs now may have to scrutinise any decision to go to war typically beforehand, this places a major additional burden on them to understand the situation in detail to make an informed decision. Several MPs Caabu spoke to said that parliamentarians were not well enough briefed in 2003. One MP said they would have liked to have heard more from independent witnesses.

2 Jamie Gaskarth (2020) 'How the Iraq War led to a legacy of public mistrust in intelligence', The British Academy Blog'. Available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/how-iraq-war-led-legacy-public-mistrust-intelligence/

The debates that did take place highlighted a very poor understanding of Iraq itself and the possible consequences of war for Iraqis.

Little discussion was spent on how the Ba'athist regime would attempt to fight the war and how Iraqis in general would respond to military intervention. There was a widespread assumption, not just amongst politicians, that all Iraqis would welcome Saddam Hussein's downfall. Leader of the Opposition, Iain Duncan-Smith, stated: "I promise that no one will shed a tear over the departure of Saddam Hussein."[3] Many Iraqis, however, did not trust the Anglo-American led coalition. A dislike for the dictator did not automatically translate into support for foreign invaders. An awareness of the history of Iraq in the 20th century, particularly the UK's colonial legacy, would have provided clues as to why.

There was also a lack of understanding of regional dynamics. For instance, how and why Iran and Syria might try to disrupt the Anglo-American invasion barely featured in the debates. A few Labour MPs also brought up the issue of Israel-Palestine and that the strong line taken on Iraq but not Israel looked like double standards. This issue was highlighted by Robin Cook, Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, when he resigned from the government. His resignation speech to the House on the eve of the vote received a standing ovation.

Very little attention was given to the views of governments in the region. Crucially, Turkey, a member of NATO, was opposed to the war, and had tried through regional diplomacy to avert the US-led invasion. On 1 March, the Turkish Parliament rejected a resolution authorising the deployment of US forces to Turkey (although eventually it did allow the US to fly over its airspace) and the transit of UK forces through its territory. The Arab League unanimously (apart from Kuwait) condemned the invasion and anti-war demonstrations took place in major towns and cities.

Most British MPs have a limited understanding of the region. They are unlikely to have visited it extensively, particularly those countries in the midst of insecurity and conflict. Those that have visited frequently are only able to participate in discussions with top level politicians and officials, not engage freely with members of the public or civil society organisations. Very few MPs had visited Iraq prior to the 2003 vote and then largely only as guests of the Iraqi regime, thereby receiving a very one-sided view of the situation. The same could be said about Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iran. The former Foreign Office Minister, Lord Hain, believed "there's more of a need to understand, especially in the context of the Middle East, what the background is and the issues are."

Evidence from senior political and military figures to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee reinforced this. General Sir Richard Barrons, former head of Joint Forces Command, described the quality of debate among politicians on military action as "lousy".[4] Lord Hague, the former Foreign Secretary, also felt that politicians needed to have "regular enhancement of their knowledge and understanding of these situations, of the choices being made by Government, the capabilities of armed forces, and the activities of potential adversaries. It would be a bigger commitment than just coming to a meeting once when military action was envisaged."[5]

Conservative MP, David Jones, backed efforts to educate MPs on conflict zones. "I do think that there is a strong argument for saying that there should be a process in the House whereby people can educate themselves on these issues. I would have thought that it's something that every MP would want to do." Jones said they should be examining "What the consequences of going in, what it means to occupy another country, what

3 House of Commons Debate (18 March 2003), Volume No. 401, Column 775. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmhansrd/vo030318/debtext/30318-10.htm

4 Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (2019) The Role of Parliament in the UK Constitution: Authorising the Use of Military Force, Oral Evidence (HC 2019-04-30) Question 217. Available at: https://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/public-administration-and-constitutional-affairs-committee/the-role-of-parliament-in-the-uk-constitution-authorising-the-use-of-military-force/oral/101541.html

5 Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (2019) The Role of Parliament in the UK Constitution: Authorising the Use of Military Force, Oral Evidence (HC 2019-04-30) Question 208.

the challenges are, most importantly, how and in what circumstances do you extricate yourself from it? The debacle in Afghanistan is a prime example of what happens when it's not properly thought through."

One cannot lay all the blame on MPs for this dearth of knowledge. They cannot specialise in every area of the world. But the challenge should be acknowledged that in a political system that is more domestic focused, where MPs interact with constituents more frequently than 20 years ago, time and resources must be found to address serious knowledge gaps. It was generally felt, by most of the MPs Caabu spoke to, that MPs needed to be far better briefed.

Parliament therefore needs to consider ways of enhancing its collective knowledge and understanding of parts of the world that could become theatres of war in which British forces could be involved. This could take the form of regular series of expert briefings held periodically. Iran could be one topic for such briefings currently.

No attention given to post-invasion governance

One crucial area where the lack of genuine understanding and focus on Iraq had calamitous consequences was over the post-invasion governance.

Whilst references were made about the need for swift humanitarian relief for Iraqis during and after the conflict, the issue of post-war governance was hardly raised. Prime Minister Blair in his speech on 18 March 2003 did not deal with how Iraq would be governed in any detail. Clare Short, then Secretary of State for International Development, has spoken widely about her attempts to raise this issue in the Cabinet. The Conservative leader, Iain Duncan-Smith, did not press Blair on this either in his response. It was widely accepted across the political spectrum that close scrutiny was not forthcoming from the Opposition due to Conservative support for the intervention.

The Commons debate made no reference to the likelihood of an Anglo-American occupation of Iraq and what that might entail. The Chilcot Inquiry determined that the government assumed that "the US would be responsible for preparing the post-conflict plan." MPs did not challenge this assumption nor scrutinise the planning. A House of Commons Library briefing of 20 September 2002, devoted just three short paragraphs to the post-conflict future of Iraq.[6] There was no attention to this until after the invasion when in April 2003, the Ad Hoc Ministerial Group on Iraq Rehabilitation, chaired by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, was set up to oversee the UK contribution to post conflict reconstruction.[7]

This meant that the UK barely influenced the disastrous plans implemented by the US through the Coalition Provisional Authority, particularly that of "de-Ba'athification". Similarly, Parliament did not discuss the role of Iraqi state institutions after the war including the army and the Ba'ath Party. The decision to disband both is widely viewed as one of the costliest decisions of the occupying powers.

Parliamentary opponents of the war also often failed to raise issues related to the future of Iraq. Tony Worthington MP was one of the few exceptions. "We are going to invade a country of Balkanesque complexity where occupying forces will be unable easily to withdraw. We are rapidly in danger of becoming piggy in the middle for every discontented ethnic or religious group in the area."[8]

Lack of knowledge about the ethnic sectarian makeup of Iraq and how it affected Iraqi politics is a failure of parliamentary scrutiny. In 2007, The Sunday Times interviewed 30 MPs about the Middle East. Some could not spell out the difference between Sunnis and Shia let alone name the president of Iran or the leader of Hizbollah.[9]

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6 House of Commons Library, (20 September 2002) 'Iraq: the debate on policy options', London: House of Commons Library, p.49. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/RP02-53/RP02-53.pdf

7 J. Chilcot (2016) 'The Report of the Iraq Inquiry. Executive Summary'. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, p.81. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry.

8 House of Commons Debate (18 March 2003), Volume No. 401, Column 831. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmhansrd/vo030318/debtext/30318-26.htm

9 Maurice Chittenden and Tom Baird (7 January 2007) 'MPs don't know their Sunnis from Shi'ites, London: The Sunday Times. Avail-

Consideration should be given for the requirement of consulting Parliament prior to the UK becoming an occupying power. Occupation of another country in whole or in part necessitates a clear understanding of legal obligations and careful scrutiny of how the occupation is conducted. Iraq expert, Professor Toby Dodge, told us: "They didn't debate about the possible, probable, implications of going to war and being an occupying power. In fact, I posit the idea that Parliament should arguably vote on whether to become an occupying power. I don't think the word 'occupation' came into those debates at all. There is a very strong and onerous responsibility on a country to be an occupying power: legally, morally and everything else. And what about the review process as it goes along?" It is clear that this did not happen in the case of Iraq, with disastrous consequences.

The devastating aftermath of the invasion

The invasion and its aftermath had a profound impact on Iraq's political and social stability, plunging Iraq into a deadly insurgency. It is impossible to know the true number of Iraqi civilian casualties, but the Costs of War project at Brown University estimates between 275,000 to 320,000 civilians were killed as a result of direct war-related violence (aerial bombing, gunshots, shelling, suicide attacks etc), with several times more dying as an indirect result of the war (because of the destruction of critical infrastructure providing access to food, water, and healthcare).[10] Many fled from the violence; over 9.2 million Iraqis were displaced to neighbouring countries and beyond.

Immediately after the fall of Baghdad, the US along with the UK, installed a caretaker administration, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in May 2003, to rule until elections could took place. The CPA's disastrous policy of "de-Ba'athification", which disproportionately targeted Sunni Muslims, triggered a deep sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims because the Ba'ath Party was predominantly Sunni. Disbanding the Iraqi army and dismissing thousands of public servants including nurses and doctors, fed into an already-deteriorating security situation. The lack of essential services and mass unemployment caused by the CPA's policies fuelled resentment amongst the Iraqi population and contributed to the insurgency.[11]

Far from there having been a significant link between the Saddam Hussein regime and Al Qaeda as some claimed prior to the war, Al Qaeda in Iraq flourished in post-war Iraq under Abu Musab Al Zarqawi. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Da'esh) grew out of Al Qaeda in Iraq but also in alliance with former senior Ba'athist figures. These groups fed on Sunni grievances, with catastrophic consequences for the region. Reflecting on these policies, Lord Hain said: "one of the fundamental post invasion, really, really terrible mistakes made mainly by the Americans, but the British went along with it trying to argue a different case, was to taking down the whole of the Iraqi state and turning the Sunnis against the West in in every sense, and not just the hardliners and the fanatics and the ideologues and the ISIS and Al Qaeda linked guys, but also the ordinary citizens who suddenly lost their jobs." The CPA's lack of knowledge of Iraqi society and its ideologically driven post-conflict reconstruction plans,[12] coupled with the corruption and nepotism in its allocation of resources, have been heavily criticised.[13]

As well as the disastrous governance policies, numerous investigations and inquiries found evidence of the systematic mistreatment and abuse of detainees by US and UK military forces in Iraq, including the use of torture. The US and UK engaged in the practice of extraordinary rendition and operated "black sites" (secret detention facilities used to interrogate suspects outside the normal legal framework). This had a devastating

able at: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/mps-dont-know-their-sunnis-from-shiites-pgwzzgrpnlx

10 The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, 'Costs of War Project', Online at: https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/

11 House of Lords Library Notice (18 January 2008) 'Debate on 24 January: Iraq'. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/LLN-2008-002/LLN-2008-002.pdf

12 Toby Dodge (2016) 'Enemy Images, Coercive Socio-engineering and Civil War in Iraq', pp. 197-217. In Mandy Turner and Florian P. Kühn (eds). The Politics of International Intervention: The Tyranny of Peace (Abingdon: Routledge).

13 Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (2013) 'Learning from Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction', United States: OSIGIR. Available at: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhrg81868/pdf/CHRG-113hhrg81868.pdf

and lasting impact on the victims of the abuse, inflamed public opinion across the Middle East (and wider), and damaged the reputations and credibility of the US and the UK.

Overall, the Iraq War can be seen as a pivotal moment in the early 21st century, with significant and long-lasting consequences for international relations. It weakened the US, the key ally of the UK, and contributed to the decline of American influence in the region. It allowed Iran to expand its influence within Iraq and elsewhere. Extremist groups such as Al Qaeda benefited and flourished within the chaos of post-war Iraq. ISIS itself grew out of Al Qaeda in Iraq feeding off the widespread resentment of Iraqi and then Syrian Sunni Arabs.

Legacy of the vote

UK public trust in the government was significantly damaged by the war in Iraq. It was particularly damaging to Tony Blair, even though opinion polls showed marginal public support for UK military deployment at the time.[14] But, crucially, the decision to go to war was unpopular amongst Labour voters, and many people believed that the Blair government had manipulated intelligence to justify the invasion; with opposition building as the war dragged on. Some MPs spoke about how their constituents brought up the issue of the Iraq War for years to come.

The war in Iraq damaged relations between the UK government and the governments of France and Germany, both of whom were strongly opposed to the invasion. French President Jacques Chirac, in particular, was an outspoken critic of the war and threatened to use France's veto power at the UN Security Council to prevent the adoption of a resolution authorising the use of force. Chirac argued that Iraq did not pose an immediate threat to international peace and security. Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, described Chirac's position as "irresponsible".[15]

The Iraq vote had a significant impact on British politics. The decision to go to war was deeply divisive within the Labour Party as well as amongst Labour MPs more broadly. Robin Cook resigned from the Cabinet over the issue. Clare Short resigned as Secretary of State for International Development after the vote and subsequently published her diaries which highlighted the absence of proper debate and the deception that surrounded the issue within the Labour government.[16] Many MPs were later criticised for failing to hold the government to account or to fully scrutinise the intelligence presented to them. The former Foreign Office Minister, Lord Hain, said: "I genuinely believed the intelligence and the intelligence has proven to be absolutely false. So, we went to war on a total lie. And had I known that it was false at the time, I would have not supported it."

Findings of the public inquiries

The decision to deploy British troops to invade Iraq in March 2003 has been investigated on numerous occasions: the Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry (FACI) in July 2003, the Intelligence and Security Committee Inquiry (ISCI) in September 2003, the Butler Inquiry (officially known as the 'Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction') in July 2004, and the Chilcot Inquiry (officially known as 'The Iraq Inquiry') which published its findings in 2016. There was also an investigation into the death of Dr David Kelly, a UK government weapons expert who was found dead in July 2003 shortly after he was revealed to be the source of a BBC report that accused the government of "sexing up" its "dodgy dossier" on Iraq's WMD. The Hutton Inquiry (officially known as the 'Report of the Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Dr David Kelly C.M.G') which reported in January 2004, concluded that Kelly had taken his own life, and cleared the government of any wrongdoing in relation to his death. But the circumstances surrounding Kelly's death continue to be a subject of debate and controversy and fed into the increasing public distrust of politicians.

14 Flora Holmes (January 2020) 'Public attitudes to military interventionism', The British Foreign Policy Group. Available at: https://bfpg.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Public-Attitudes-to-Military-Intervention-1.pdf

15 J. Chilcot (2016) 'The Report of the Iraq Inquiry. Executive Summary'. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, p.36. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry

16 Clare Short (2004) An Honourable Deception? New Labour, Iraq and the Misuse of Power. London: Free Press.

The FACI, ISCI and the Butler Inquiry all concluded that the UK's intelligence on Iraq's WMD was seriously flawed, that the implications of military action (including post-conflict governance and reconstruction) had not been adequately considered, and that the government failed to explore all options for a peaceful resolution. These were a precursor to the more comprehensive Chilcot Inquiry that was established in 2009 to investigate the UK's involvement in the war, from the lead-up to the conflict to the withdrawal of British troops in 2009.

The Chilcot Inquiry heard evidence from a variety of witnesses, including politicians, senior civil servants (including intelligence officials), senior diplomats, high-ranking military officers, former government officials, and the former prime minister, Tony Blair. The final report, which stretched to 2.6 million words published in 12 volumes with a 150-page executive summary, was damning. Its findings echoed the earlier inquiries in its conclusion that the UK's involvement in the war was based on flawed intelligence, that the legal basis for war was "far from satisfactory" (particularly that peaceful diplomatic solutions had not been exhausted), and that the UK's preparations for post-war Iraq were "wholly inadequate". It also criticised the leadership of Tony Blair and the UK government as a whole, although the report stopped short of accusing Blair of deliberately misleading parliament.

As well as the reputational damage caused to the UK by its involvement in the Iraq War, there were also other impacts. The direct cost to the UK of the war in Iraq was at least £9.2bn; 89 percent of which was spent on military operations. A total of 179 British Armed Forces personnel or Ministry of Defence civilians died serving on Operation TELIC; 136 of which were killed as a result of hostile action.[17]

How the Iraq vote influenced future votes for war

The legacy of the Iraq War has weighed heavily on the minds of many MPs, particularly on the occasion of other parliamentary votes on military deployment. In 2013, the Conservative government of Prime Minister David Cameron sought parliamentary approval for military action in Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against civilians during the Syrian revolution and civil war. MPs were wary of military action without a clear mandate from the UN Security Council, and without a clear plan about what would happen after any military intervention. There was also concern about the possibility of the conflict in Syria further destabilising the region. Professor Toby Dodge said he felt the Foreign Affairs Select Committee's report on Syria, which was very thorough, was a crucial factor – and should be regarded as a model for the future. As a result, the 2013 Syria vote was defeated, with 285 MPs voting against military action and 272 in favour. The defeat was a significant setback for the government and marked a turning point in the UK government's approach to foreign policy and military intervention.

Many MPs told Caabu that the Iraq War vote hung over them when considering military action in Libya, Syria and against ISIS. Paula Sherriff, who was an MP from 2015-2019, said: "I had to make an informed and an educated decision and I was desperate not to fall into the Iraq trap. It was really sobering to think that we'd basically traipse through lobbies in the Houses of Parliament, and this was a consequence of that vote." Sherriff expressed appreciation for briefings from officials which helped make her decisions when she was not sure.

The August 2013 vote, when Parliament rejected the government's proposals on military action in Syria, took this convention to a new level. Prime Minister David Cameron accepted the parliamentary verdict and did not commit UK forces to military action. Former Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown, blamed the outcome of the vote on "The leftover poisons of the Iraq war; the toxic effect of public distrust in our politics."[18] MPs interviewed for this paper stressed their view that the Syria vote was rushed. The government did not make an effective case for intervention and what it was designed to achieve. This was the principal reason it lost by thirteen votes. Reflecting on the vote, Lord Hain said: "I think if Syria had happened pre-2003, I suspect Cameron would have carried the vote." Labour, now in opposition, was also more critical of the government.

17 UK Ministry of Defense, 'British Fatalities, Operations in Iraq'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/fields-of-operation/iraq

18 Toby Helm (31 August 2013) 'No. 10 launches bitter assault on Ed Miliband over Syria vote', London: The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/aug/31/syria-commons-vote-cameron-miliband

The decision of Prime Minister Theresa May to commit British forces to military action against Syria in April 2018 without prior parliamentary consent showed that the Royal Prerogative is not dead. That said, as Dr James Strong has argued, the War Powers Convention remains in place, if weaker, so Parliament can still be expected to decide upon future UK military interventions.[19]

Lessons learned and recommendations

1. Foster a more conducive environment for debate and reflection

Politicians could make greater efforts to ensure that when determining such serious matters as the use of military force, the debate is more consensual and conducive to thoughtful discussion than that which existed in 2003. The media too has a responsibility in not exacerbating divisions for greater viewing numbers. Increasingly in the era of social media, greater care must be taken as to sources of information.

Political parties should also consider allowing votes for military deployment as a free vote not subject to a "three-line whip"; this could help foster more open debate.

2. Involve experts from the countries involved

Another feature of the broader public debate on military intervention is the near absence of experts from the countries involved. Iraqis were largely missing from these debates about the future of their country. Too much credence was attached to external activist groups such as the Iraqi National Congress under Ahmed Chalabi. A wider array of Iraqi opinion might have helped build a clearer picture of the situation and made decision-making less dependent on a narrow clique. Six leading UK academics relayed critical messages about what might happen when US and UK forces invaded Iraq to Prime Minister Tony Blair in a rare meeting with experts in November 2002.[20] Despite their explicit warnings, the consequences of the invasion were underestimated.

In later interventions, more Syrians and Libyans were involved in the debate over policies towards their countries but arguably still not enough.

Enhancing the understanding of MPs about Iraq and the devastating consequences of war would have been optimal. To the extent that this is possible, professional expert briefing sessions on potential conflict zones should be considered and parliamentarians strongly encouraged to attend.

3. Enhance the role of Select Committees

The relevant Select Committees are the obvious parliamentary bodies to develop further expertise. Most of the MPs Caabu interviewed believed that the committees were sufficiently resourced, although some thought that their powers could be increased. Consideration should be given to allowing the relevant committees, not just the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, access to review classified information relevant to a vote on war and the opportunity to challenge such intelligence.

With the widespread adoption of video conferencing technologies, future parliamentary briefings including at Select Committees should include more input where possible from experts within the affected countries. Select Committees can now take evidence via Zoom and this should be used to ensure the best possible input.

19 James Strong (2022) 'Did Theresa May Kill the War Powers Convention? Comparing Parliamentary Debates on UK Intervention in Syria in 2013 and 2018', Parliamentary Affairs, 75, pp.400–419.

20 Jamie Merrill (7 July 2016) 'Blair acted with "complete ignorance" over Iraq, says former adviser', Middle East Eye. Available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/blair-acted-complete-ignorance-over-iraq-war-says-former-adviser

4. Create a more proactive role for Parliament

Parliament should take a more proactive role in reviewing the course and conduct of a conflict, in order to effectively hold the Executive to account. If the House of Commons has had to vote on going to war, then MPs are duty-bound to engage more intensively with how it develops. This was insufficient in the case of Iraq but also regarding Libya (2011) and the military action against Da'esh in both Syria and Iraq.

Parliament should also be consulted before the UK assumes the role of an occupying power, whether it be in full or in part. An occupation of another country requires a thorough comprehension of legal responsibilities and meticulous examination of the methods employed during the occupation. These crucial measures were not taken in the case of Iraq. Decisions to go to war should not just focus on winning it militarily; equal attention should be given to how to create and sustain the peace afterwards. MPs should appreciate the magnitude of the task.

The Council for Arab-British Understanding (Caabu)

Caabu is a not-for-profit cross-party organisation whose mission is to work for a British Middle East policy that promotes conflict resolution, human rights and civil society in the Arab world through informed debate and mutual understanding. Caabu is one of the most active NGOs working on the Middle East in the British Parliament since its establishment in 1967. From then on, Caabu has assumed an active advocacy, educational and media role.

About the authors:

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