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## Managing the economy of truth

By Peter Browne

**The rhetoric about truth and lies in politics comes easily. The next step's much harder - finding the evidence.**

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The plan to focus on Mr Howard's 'lies' slipped off Labor's election agenda following the government's audacious decision to make 'trust' the focus of its own campaign. Labor had already pushed this line as far as it could. Children overboard aside, the Prime Minister's most contentious statements have been not so much 'lies' as careful economy with the truth.

The government's handling of the release of the parliamentary report on Australia's pre-war intelligence on Iraq is a prime example of Mr Howard's spin technique at its boldest. No outright 'lies' were uttered, but the most politically dangerous of the committee's findings were effectively neutralised.

The bipartisan Parliamentary Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD, chaired by Liberal backbencher David Jull, was asked in June last year to examine Australia's pre-war intelligence gathering and analysis, and the way the government presented those findings to the public. The committee released its report on March 1.

Mr Howard began preparing his political ground early in February. He publicly 'conceded' that the intelligence relied on to invade Iraq was 'inaccurate', but 'ruled out any immediate inquiry' of the type that was being considered in Britain. This generated an innocuous debate about whether or not another inquiry was needed, when it should be held and who should run it.

The leaking began in mid-February. Although it's difficult to establish who was responsible for releasing parts of the committee's report, it seems clear that the first journalist to expose its likely content - Tom Allard of the *Sydney Morning Herald* - hadn't seen the entire text. Missing was the committee's critical assessment of the way in which the government had used the intelligence it received from the Office of National Assessments and the Defence Intelligence Organisation.

Writing on February 17, Allard focused on the shortcomings of the agencies' performances. 'There appeared to be no systematic doctoring of intelligence by Australia's political leaders before the Iraq war' but there was not enough information to be definitive, a parliamentary report is expected to find,' he wrote. 'It is understood Australia's intelligence services do not get off so lightly' the bipartisan report finding they did not provide advice of the highest standards before the decision was taken to send troops to war.'

Quoting an unnamed source, Allard continued:

'While the government did not get 'a clean bill of health' in the report, 'there will be some things that the intelligence services won't be happy about at all' Another source familiar with the inquiry's draft report said: 'I don't think the government will want to change a word of it.'

As it turned out, there were quite a few words in the report that the government would have happily changed. With the release of the committee's report still a fortnight away, however, a much less nuanced account than Allard's went out on the newswires. 'IRAQ REPORT EXPECTED TO CLEAR GOVT', reported Australian Associated Press.

Key paragraphs of the report would tell a different story. Examining the government's case 'that Iraq possessed WMD in large quantities and posed a grave and unacceptable threat to the region and the world, particularly as there was a danger that Iraq's WMD might be passed to terrorist organisations', the committee concluded:

'This is not the picture that emerges from an examination of all the assessments provided to the committee by Australia's two analytical agencies.'

The picture that did emerge, according to the committee, was that our Prime Minister and Foreign Minister had used material from British and US sources in their prewar speeches, going further than the ONA and DIO assessments in important ways.

The committee also found that Mr Howard and Mr Downer were highly selective in quoting from reports from the Chief UN Weapons Inspector, Hans Blix, and the International Atomic

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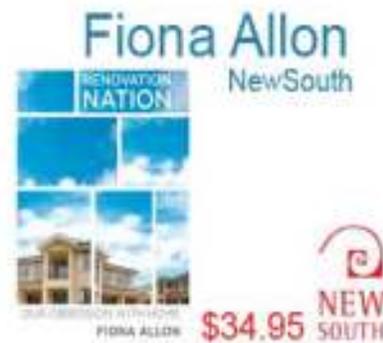
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Energy Agency. Out of all the material produced by the two inspection teams, only one of Blix's statements " that Iraq was 'cooperative on process, but not on substance' - was ever used in government speeches. As the committee suggested, the government could equally have mentioned Blix's report of 'increasing cooperation and 'numerous initiatives' from the Iraqi side, even though cooperation was not immediate'.

By the March 1 release of the report, the government had succeeded in focusing attention on the committee's criticisms of the two agencies. To reinforce this emphasis, the Prime Minister announced he would accept the committee's recommendation for a further inquiry into intelligence.

On release day, SBS News announced that the committee had 'cleared the government of embellishing intelligence assessments'. Reuters news agency announced: 'AUSTRALIA CLEARD OF 'SEXING UP' IRAQ INTEL-REPORT', even though the phrase 'sexing up' does not appear in the committee's report. The spinners were clearly at work, playing on the ambiguity of a term that had a specific meaning in the postwar debate in Britain. If you take 'sexing up' to mean exaggeration - the way it has usually been used in Australia - then the Reuters headline was misleading, to say the least. But the aim was to obfuscate, and the government succeeded in this aim.

In subsequent interviews, the Prime Minister focused on the committee's finding that government's argument for war 'was more moderate and more measured than that of either of its alliance partners'. Mr Howard couldn't resist labouring this point, telling ABC Radio that 'the committee found that the statements I and my colleagues made were very moderate'. As the report clearly shows, saying Mr Howard was more moderate than President Bush is not saying much. Nor does it negate the finding that the Australian government put a stronger case than was justified by the Australian intelligence advice. For his part, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer declared that the report 'vindicated' the government's use of intelligence material - but at no point does the report say anything like this.

Over the next few days confusion persisted over which of the government's actions had and hadn't been criticised by the committee. Different accounts of the report's findings appeared in the print and broadcast media. Reporter Matt Brown, on ABC Radio's PM, was among the first to identify the cautiously expressed but telling criticism of the government, and it was generally the broadsheet papers and the Australian Financial Review that offered a more accurate account.

But with its 'vindication' message and its careful framing of what the inquiry was about, the government had already created significant momentum in its own favour. And, very quickly and according to plan, attention moved to whether Philip Flood was the right person to conduct the next inquiry.

That's how the government spun the findings of this important report. Mr Howard's strategy didn't entirely bury the truth - but it created enough confusion to blunt the inquiry's message, and win some undeservedly favourable headlines for the government.

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