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What Blix Told Howard about WMDs
by Peter Browne

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Although the postwar conflict in Iraq has slipped off the front pages, the crisis continues. People are still being killed, the new Iraqi government is reported to be increasingly authoritarian, and all the evidence suggests that the war has heightened rather than reduced the threat of terrorism. Yet the Prime Minister, Mr Howard, says he would do it all again.

To maintain his belief in the war, Mr Howard has had to modify his arguments over the past year – especially once it became clear that Iraq possessed no weapons of mass destruction at all. With his main argument shown to be baseless, Mr Howard adopted a new strategy to deal with his critics: the argument that “everybody” had shared his belief that Iraq had WMDs in the months leading up to the war.

“The other point I’d make,” he told journalists during a doorstop interview in Perth in February, “is that everybody else said there was WMD. Simon Crean said it, Kevin Rudd said it, even the Germans and the Russians said it and Jacques Chirac almost said it. So people weren’t arguing a year ago about whether or not there was WMD…” This week, he told ABC News Radio that “everybody believed at the beginning of last year that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction…”

Everybody? As war approached in early 2003, the Chief UN Weapons Inspector, Hans Blix, was becoming increasingly sceptical about the claims being made by the US and British governments and picked up by Mr Howard. When the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, spelt out the case for war at the UN, Dr Blix was struck by the fact that his own people – the UNMOVIC inspectors – had visited “most of the sites” described by Powell and “in no case had we found convincing evidence of any prohibited activity.” Overwhelmingly, intelligence tip-offs from the US and its allies had led nowhere. Although Dr Blix was trying to keep an open mind, and wouldn’t have been surprised if some weapons were uncovered, he had found no evidence to justify war.

Dr Blix’s doubts are well known. What’s much less well known is the fact that he discussed them with John Howard in New York just over five weeks before the war began and less than a week after Powell had addressed the UN.

In his book, *Disarming Iraq: The Search for Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Dr Blix makes a passing reference to the meeting on 11 February 2003 at Mr Howard’s hotel on Fifth Avenue:

“On the day after my return to New York [from Baghdad] I went first to the Pierre Hotel to brief the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard. He’d come from Washington and
agreed with the US administration’s line of reasoning regarding Iraq. He listened kindly to my briefing and the hope that I voiced for assurance of Iraqi disarmament through inspection, but appeared convinced that the Iraqis were cheating.” Dr Blix left the hotel for a meeting with President Bush’s National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, at the United Nations building.

Curious to find out more about his meeting with Mr Howard, I emailed Dr Blix last week [[ie. on 11 August]] at the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, a new Swedish government–funded organisation he chairs. His response arrived the following day.

“I have no written notes from the conversation with your PM on 11 Feb 2003,” he wrote, “but I have described in my book ‘Disarming Iraq’ the longer talk I had with Condoleezza Rice immediately following the meeting with PM Howard and I am sure the thrust of my comments were the same at the two meetings.”

According to *Disarming Iraq*, Dr Blix told Ms Rice that he had sensed in Baghdad “a more serious effort to cooperate actively” although he could not rule out the possibility that it was “part of a dilatory tactic”. The Iraqi government had finally agreed to surveillance flights by American U-2 aircraft. “I went on to say”, he writes, “that I had not been ‘terribly impressed’ by the intelligence that had been provided by member states so far. By now UNMOVIC had been to a number of sites indicated by intelligence tips and only one had proved of relevance to the commission’s mandate.”

Ms Rice responded by saying that it was Iraq that was on trial, not intelligence, and that the issue was “quickly coming to an end”. It was this sense of an inexorable slide towards war that John Howard had picked up on in Washington.

In his response to my email Dr Blix summed up his meeting with Mr Howard with these words: “Even without any written notes from the conversation with PM Howard… I am confident that far from saying to Mr Howard that there were WMDs in Iraq I conveyed to him that we were not impressed by the ‘evidence’ presented to this effect. Regrettably, there were few at that time who cared to examine evidence about Iraq with a critical mind.”

The Prime Minister emerged from his meeting with Dr Blix to address a group of Australian journalists. Somewhat disingenuously, he wouldn’t talk about what the chief weapons inspector had said: “I don’t think it’s helpful at this stage for me to be trying to put some particular interpretation on the discussion I had.” The obvious question is: not helpful to whom? Certainly not helpful to Mr Howard, whose case for war was in no way supported by Dr Blix’s briefing.

Despite the fact that Dr Blix’s inspectors were actually in Iraq – unlike many other sources of information the UK, US and Australian governments relied on in early 2003 – his findings were rarely mentioned by Mr Howard or the Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, in the run-up to the war. In fact, according to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Intelligence on Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction, which was carried out by a
committee with a majority of government members, only one of Blix’s statements – that Iraq was “cooperative on process, but not on substance” – was ever used in government speeches. In its report in March this year, the committee observed that this statement was far from a complete account of what Dr Blix was reporting.

“UNMOVIC also noted increasing cooperation and ‘numerous initiatives’ from the Iraqi side, even though cooperation was not immediate,” said the committee. “They reported that the results of inspections were consistent with Iraqi declarations and that no weapons of mass destruction had been found. Their findings were most emphatic in relation to nuclear weapons.”

The Prime Minister has vigorously denied the charge that Australia went to war on the basis of “a lie”. Perhaps lie is the wrong word. But it’s difficult to think of a better word to describe a case for war – with all the deaths, injuries and destruction that have taken place over the past year and a half – built on the claim that Iraq undoubtedly had WMDs, when we now know that the Prime Minister chose to ignore the evidence of the inspectors Australia had voted to send into Iraq. Hans Blix’s account of the meeting in New York provides more evidence of Mr Howard’s cavalier attitude to the momentous question of whether a country should go to war.

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