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Intoxicated by power, Blair tricked us into war

The members of the Chilcot Inquiry have a choice: they can be loyal to the Establishment or they can expose the subterfuge

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The degree of deceit involved in our decision to go to war on Iraq becomes steadily clearer. This was a foreign policy disgrace of epic proportions and playing footsie on Sunday morning television does nothing to repair the damage. It is now very difficult to avoid the conclusion that Tony Blair engaged in an alarming subterfuge with his partner George Bush and went on to mislead and cajole the British people into a deadly war they had made perfectly clear they didn't want, and on a basis that it's increasingly hard to believe even he found truly credible. Who is any longer naive enough to accept that the then Prime Minister's mind remained innocently open after his visit to Crawford, Texas?

Hindsight is a great temptress. But we needn't trouble her on the way to a confident conclusion that Mr Blair's fundamental flaw was his sycophancy towards power. Perhaps this seems odd in a man who drank so much of that mind-altering brew at home. But Washington turned his head and he couldn't resist the stage or the glamour that it gave him. In this sense he was weak and, as we can see, he remains so. Since those sorry days we have frequently heard him repeating the self-regarding mantra that "hand on heart, I only did what I thought was right". But this is a narcissist's defence and self-belief is no answer to misjudgment: it is certainly no answer to death. "Yo, Blair", perhaps, was his truest measure.

How effectively the Chilcot Inquiry, to which Mr Blair will give evidence in the new year, can expose any of this remains to be seen. Ominously for the former Prime Minister, his growing distance from power appears to be loosening some well-placed Whitehall tongues. It seems that the contempt felt by some mandarins for his fancier footwork around the weapons of mass destruction is finally showing in a belated settling of scores. Discretion is fading like toothache and the feast of revenge is as tempting as it is cold.

Yet the position of the inquiry panel is uncertain. So far, apart from some interventions by Sir Roderic Lyne, the former ambassador in Moscow, its questioning has been unchallenging. If this is born of a belief that it creates an atmosphere more conducive to truth, it seems naive. The truth doesn't always glide out so compliantly; sometimes it struggles to be heard. Sometimes it takes cover in a shelter that is entirely self-serving.

Sir John Chilcot himself, a distinguished former Permanent Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office during the Troubles and finely tuned for years to the security services, will be key. Perhaps a great and brave struggle against instinct will be necessary. In British public life, loyalty and service to power can sometimes count for more to insiders than any tricky questions of wider reputation. It's the regard you are held in by your peers that really counts, so that steadfastness in the face of attack and threatened exposure brings its own rich hierarchy of honour and reward. Disloyalty, on the other hand, means a terrible casting out, a rocky and barren Roman exile that few have the courage to endure. So which way will our heroes jump?

We must hope in the right direction — for it is precisely this privately arranged nature of British Establishment power, stubborn beyond sympathy for years in the face of the modern world, that has brought our politics so low. If Chilcot fails to reveal the truth without fear in this Middle Eastern story of violence and destruction, the inquiry will be held in deserved and withering contempt. This would be a serious blow to the integrity of the State. It would not restore trust.

For so many years this would not have mattered. Questions sufficiently critical and grand were decided at an elevated level, and in air more refined than most people would ever inhale. A besotted king could be skewered in the shadows and depart, or an illustrious commission twist and turn from any finding of government fault. And if the cost of the reasoning was ermine splashed in whitewash, the price would be willingly paid.

But it's harder today and the tax on dishonesty is rising. Now our system has to prove itself again and again, it has to persuade people that it deserves their loyalty and support. Citizens believe deeply in a democratic right to know and they no longer acknowledge their unworthiness to enjoy its nourishment. Naturally, this is a less comfortable world for people in power, but it's a much better world for everyone else. The real tragedy of Iraq, beyond all the danger and the terrible loss, is that it rendered any affair of the heart between government and people no more than a wisp, like a lie in the wind. It broke faith.

This is the gravity of Chilcot, and its broader meaning. A few months of their deliberations will tell us how well, through the solemn work of these illustrious individuals, each one of us, and therefore our country, measures up to a compromised past.

We have seen enormous acts of courage on the part of our men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan. The most heart-rending sacrifices have been made; many of them will become poetry and song in future years. But none of this sprinkles, as he might once have hoped it would, any starlight on Tony Blair. On the contrary, it is entirely the work of warriors thrust carelessly into death's way by a Prime Minister lost in self-aggrandisement and a governing class too closed to speak truth to power.