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Australian government continues coverup of 2003 Iraq invasion documents

The Australian Labor government is still hiding from public view the key cabinet documents relating to the Howard Liberal-National government's decision to join the US and UK in the barbaric and catastrophic invasion of Iraq in 2003.



Dennis Richardson [Photo: U.S. Studies Centre]

This week, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government published an "independent" report by former intelligence chief Dennis Richardson into the supposed mistaken misplacing of Iraq war documents that were not released by the National Archives on January 1 this year as required after 20 years.

That illegal invasion was a monumental war crime, committed in the predatory interests of US imperialism and its partners in asserting control over the resource-rich and globally strategic Middle East.

It was conducted on the basis of manufactured disinformation about Iraq having "weapons of mass destruction" and a nuclear weapons stockpile ready to strike European and

American cities. It violated the core principle laid down by the Nuremberg Tribunal after World War II, which found that the central crime of the Nazis, from which all their other crimes flowed, was the launching of unprovoked and aggressive wars.

The 2003 invasion and eight-year military occupation led to the annihilation of an entire society, killing an estimated one million Iraqis, displacing three million people and destroying much of its social infrastructure, including electrical power and water supplies, food processing and the production of medical supplies.

Moreover, the invasion was launched in March 2003 in defiance of huge global protests, involving some 10 million people on a single weekend in February 2003, including half a million across Australia, who rejected the lies concocted by the US, UK and Australian governments.

None of that gets a mention in Richardson's report.

As expected, Richardson cleared the Morrison Liberal-National government of any responsibility for failing to hand over the documents to the National Archives in 2020 to be vetted in preparation for release. The report says any suggestion of political influence or interference in the missing submissions was "without foundation."

Regardless of that exoneration, Richardson's report makes it clear that any document which reveals the real reasons and political calculations behind the Iraq invasion, and Australia's frontline involvement in it, will be kept secret on the grounds of "national security."

In fact, the report outlines the extraordinary measures in place to ensure that no sensitive documents about going to war, especially those of the inner National Security Committee (NSC) of cabinet, which officially makes those decisions, ever see the light of day.

The NSC is a secretive cabal, consisting of key ministers plus senior officials and the military and intelligence chiefs. Richardson reveals that its key documents have been excluded from the annual National Archives releases under the 20-year rule ever since the Howard government formally established the NSC in 1996 as the war decision-making body.

This means that all the documents about the decisions made by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, to join or support US-led or backed military operations since then remain shrouded in secrecy.

That includes the sending of troops to East Timor in 1999, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the 2003 Iraq invasion, the deadly Afghanistan "surge" of 2009–14, the ongoing US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the latest dispatch of military

personnel to join the bombing of Yemen to support the intensifying Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Richardson's report suggests that, as a matter of "a certain logic," "the NAA [National Archives of Australia] should consider the desirability of including NSC records in the annual public release process in the same way as records of the full Cabinet," because the NSC is "a full decision making committee of the Cabinet."

This is no more than a PR exercise to try to legitimise the anti-democratic veil of secrecy over all war-related moves.

Richardson admits that "more of its [NSC] records than those of the full Cabinet may remain closed for security reasons." That is, any highly-classified material would be exempted under section 33 of the Archives Act.

That section keeps secret any records that "could reasonably be expected to cause damage to the security, defence or international relations of the Commonwealth" or information that "was communicated in confidence by, or on behalf of, a foreign government."

Thus, no information about the actual mercenary and political calculations of the Australian capitalist ruling elite or its US and UK allies can be released. Such war crimes are intensifying today in the Middle East and are being prepared against Russia and China—all in the name of "security" and "international relations."

Certainly, section 33 would block any opening to the public of records of what a 2003 cabinet minute referred to as Prime Minister Howard's "extensive discussions over a period of time" with both US President George W Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair.

These discussions began long before Howard's March 2003 announcement that Australia had joined the invasion. The Australian government and military had been deeply involved in US planning for the war, and wider wars, at least since Bush foreshadowed the invasion in his January 2002 State of the Union "axis of evil" speech, targeting Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

As Richardson notes as well, section 29 of the Archives Act also "allows a responsible Minister, or a Commonwealth institution with the agreement of the Director General of the NAA, to determine that a Commonwealth record, or class of Commonwealth records, is not required to be transferred to the NAA, or can only be accessed by the NAA on specified conditions."

That is, the NSC itself can simply "determine" that its records, or any other top-secret records, not be handed over to the NAA. Richardson reveals that none of the most

sensitive NSC records about the Iraq invasion, those at “the Secret and above level,” were transferred to the NAA in 2020.

Richardson divulges that the NAA director general has no Top Secret Positive Vetting (TSPV) security clearance, and therefore cannot make the crucial exemption decisions. The report voices concern that this would not “be considered credible in the event of the matter becoming public, leading to intense media and political scrutiny.”

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Apart from the NSC, the secrecy and vetting powers are in the hands of the intelligence agencies, particularly the domestic political spy agency, the Australian Intelligence Security Organisation (ASIO), which Richardson headed from 1996 to 2005.

Despite dubbing Richardson an “independent reviewer,” the Albanese government appointed him to conduct the review into the missing documents affair, in a bid to counter widespread public concern about the coverup, precisely because he has been a pivotal figure in the military-intelligence apparatus for decades.

In fact, having been appointed by the Howard government as ASIO director-general in 1996, Richardson was a party to all the war moves discussed inside the NSC in the lead up to the Iraq invasion. Then he was installed in the key post of Australian ambassador in Washington from 2005 to 2010. After that, he headed the foreign affairs department, followed by the defence department, and remains frequently employed as a top-level conductor of government security reviews.

Richardson’s report states that the prime minister’s department literally lost track of cabinet documents in 2020. “[A] box of cabinet records was left in a secure storage area pending intelligence agency review and subsequently forgotten.”

Richardson attributes this to the department being overwhelmed by its COVID-19 pandemic workload, although he found that similar documents, including notebooks containing the details of cabinet discussions, had been misplaced since 1978.

The largest cache of 77 missing 2003 documents, Richardson says, were put aside during the early part of the pandemic as officials dealt with the newly-created “National Cabinet,” which met 50 times between March and August 2020—almost three times a week.

Like the NSC, all the records of the National Cabinet, a new potentially authoritarian form of rule by the federal, state and territory government leaders, are shrouded in secrecy. And like the NSC, the Albanese government has maintained the National Cabinet.

It just so happened that of all the 77 missing cabinet records that were discovered, Richardson says 13 records, containing no less than 38 NSC minutes, related to the Iraq war. These and four other records unearthed will not be released. Instead, they will be reviewed by the intelligence agencies before material, if any, is disclosed.

Richardson specifically clears previous prime ministers of any responsibility for the misplacement of the documents. He says he interviewed John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison, with none able to recall ever being involved in the transfer of cabinet records to the archives.

Far from any relaxation of the secrecy regime, Richardson recommended its tightening, including by ensuring that “the staff responsible at the working level for transfer of Cabinet records to the NAA have a TSPV clearance.” The Albanese government has accepted this and Richardson’s other similar recommendations.

On every front, the Labor government is intent on protecting its NSC war-making powers, along with its National Cabinet deliberations, from any public scrutiny. That is another warning that it is plunging the population further into disastrous US wars and war plans, along with deeper attacks on the conditions and basic democratic rights of the working class in order to impose the massive costs of war and suppress opposition.

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