

Britain: Short's allegations of spying against UN confirm criminal character of Iraq war

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28 February 2004

Former cabinet member Clare Short has come under sustained attack by the Labour government and sections of the media for revealing that Britain spied on United Nations general secretary Kofi Annan in the run-up to the Iraq war.

She was denounced by Prime Minister Tony Blair as “deeply irresponsible” for reporting the information and for supposedly endangering Britain’s security services.

A host of cabinet members joined in efforts to defend Blair, most notably the former foreign secretary Robin Cook. Like Short, Cook left the government over the war, but he has clearly not abandoned hopes of readmittance.

Cook said he would be “surprised” if Short’s allegations were true. “This is part of Clare’s political agenda to undermine the prime minister,” Cook said. “And it is damaging both to the government and to the party which gave her all the privileges she enjoyed in government.”

Yet, despite the feigned outrage of the government’s supporters, not one has flatly denied the truth of Short’s claim.

Short’s revelation emerged whilst she was being interviewed on BBC Radio Four’s “Today” programme by John Humphreys, regarding the collapse of the government’s attempt to prosecute Katharine Gun, a translator at the government spy centre GCHQ.

Gun had leaked a memo from the United States asking for Britain’s help in spying on UN delegates prior to the vote on whether to support war against Iraq. In this context, Short said, “I mean the UK in this time was also spying on Kofi Annan’s office and getting reports from him about what was going on.”

She added, “And in the case of Kofi’s office it’s been done for some time.... Well I know, I have seen

transcripts of Kofi Annan’s conversations. Indeed, I have had conversations with Kofi in the run-up to war thinking ‘Oh dear, there will be a transcript of this and people will see what he and I are saying.’”

Short has rightly dismissed Blair’s attack on her, insisting that there is no danger to national security and no threat to any member of the security forces raised by her disclosures. Referring to Blair’s statement, she asked, “What’s he going to say? He either says ‘yes, it’s true’ or he has to say ‘no, it’s not true,’ then he would be telling a lie. So he’s got to say something else, so he can have a go at me.”

This essentially characterises all of the attacks on Short. They are an attempt to divert attention from the essential issue at hand—that Britain carried out illegal spying activity against the leader of the UN, and did so as part of its ongoing efforts to swing that body behind an illegal war.

The bugging of the general secretary’s office, or of any UN delegate, is prohibited under the 1946 agreement on the general privileges and immunities enjoyed by the UN, which declares that the “premises of the UN shall be inviolable.” More generally, the 1961 Vienna Convention prohibits the bugging of embassies and is clearly relevant.

Significantly, however, Short’s revelation has led to a flurry of statements by top political figures and security analysts that have proclaimed that a) such bugging is routine and b) that it reached a zenith in the run-up to the Iraq war.

Writing in the *Daily Mirror*, Alex Standish, Editor of *Jane’s Intelligence Digest*, explained “Claire Short has exposed a dirty little secret of the intelligence world—that Britain spies on friends as well as foes.” He added that “the revelations surprised nobody familiar with the backrooms of British intelligence. What is

surprising is the way one of the most highly secret peacetime operations ever undertaken should have been so damagingly exposed to public view.”

Short’s accusation of spying has been backed up by no less than the former UN general secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali. He told the BBC that he had been warned his office would be bugged. “From the first time I entered my office they told me: ‘Beware, your office is bugged, your residence is bugged, and it’s a tradition member states who have the technical capacity to bug will do it without hesitation.’”

Richard Butler, the former UN chief weapons inspector, added that while he was in charge of investigating Iraq’s weapons programmes in the late 1990s, he met his contacts in New York’s Central Park because the telephones in his UN office were insecure. “I was utterly confident that in my attempts to have private diplomatic conversations trying to solve the problem of the disarmament of Iraq that I was being listened to by the Americans, the British, the French and the Russians. They also had people on my staff who were reporting what I was trying to do privately.”

Several informers have suggested that the transcripts seen by Short would have probably originated from the United States National Security Agency (NSA). Speaking to the *Guardian*, intelligence expert James Bamford described the continuing joint operation between the NSA and GCHQ known as “Echelon.”

He describes the NSA and GCHQ as collectively “the largest espionage organisation the world has ever known, one capable of eavesdropping on conversations virtually anywhere on the planet.”

Bamford continued that every 60 minutes, the US and British intelligence agencies intercept millions of telephone calls, e-mails and faxes. It was an NSA memo that was leaked by Katharine Gun on the proposal to target six “swing” countries in the UN.

Short’s revelations are a further indication of the politically criminal character of both the Bush administration and its British hangers-on. The surveillance and spying employed by the US and Britain are hardly new. But this does not detract from the fact that Washington and London were using illegal methods in pursuit of their aims.

In their drive to war against Iraq, the US and Britain were seeking hegemony over the Middle East and its oil supplies. They could not openly declare such an

intention, but instead had to advance the spurious argument that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that constituted an immediate threat to world peace.

Anyone who remained unconvinced, who opposed war or questioned its wisdom, was not viewed as an ally, but as an enemy. As President George W. Bush famously declared, “You are either with us, or against us.”

Hence the treatment of Annan and the broader intelligence operations against UN members against the war. Bugging Annan’s office would provide unprecedented opportunities to gauge the views of France, Germany, Russia and China, and waverers such as Angola, Cameron, Guinea, Pakistan, Mexico and Chile. It would also possibly provide information that could be used to blackmail or cajole them into changing their position.



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