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Spies threaten Blair with 'smoking gun' over Iraq

Senior intelligence officers kept secret records of meetings after pressure from No 10

By Kim Sengupta and Andy McSmith

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Intelligence officers are holding a "smoking gun" which proves that they were subjected to a series of demands by Tony Blair's staff in the run-up to the Iraq war.

The officers are furious about the accusation levelled by the Leader of the Commons, John Reid, that "rogue elements" are at work in the security services. They fear they are being lined up to take the blame for faulty intelligence used to justify the Iraq war.

The intelligence services were so concerned about demands made by Downing Street for evidence to use against Iraq that extensive files have been built up detailing communications with Mr Blair's staff.

Stung by Dr Reid's accusations about misinformation over Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, intelligence officials have given veiled warnings about what may emerge in the two official inquiries into the affair.

"A smoking gun may well exist over WMDs, but it may not be to the Government's liking," said one senior source. "Minuted details will show exactly what went on. Because of the frequency and, at times, unusual nature of the demands from Downing Street, people have made sure records were kept. There is a certain amount of self-preservation in this, of course."

It is believed some of the minutes relate to conversations involving the Joint Intelligence Committee, Alastair Campbell, the Prime Minister's communications director, Jonathan Powell, Mr Blair's chief of staff, and Sir David Omand, the Government's security and intelligence co-ordinator. However, records had also been made, it is claimed, by individual officers in communications within the intelligence services.

The intelligence services are also seething about Dr Reid's claims of spies trying to undermine an elected government. Although the Prime Minister and the Cabinet have been careful not to repeat the allegations, some security officials feel Dr Reid should apologise. "I don't know about the other [intelligence] services, but he certainly has not apologised to the chief of defence intelligence," said a Ministry of Defence official.

"The mood is very fractious at the moment. Intelligence officials are keen that the inquiries should establish the demarcation between what was supplied to Downing Street by them, and what it received from the Americans."

Mr Blair has defended the failure to uncover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq by saying that the occupying authorities have a more urgent task in bringing security and humanitarian aid to the country. "In Northern Ireland we were searching for IRA weapons for the best part of 40 years and that is a tiny country. Iraq is almost the size of France," he said yesterday.

The failure to uncover WMDs in Iraq is costing Mr Blair political support even among Labour and Conservative MPs who backed the war but are angry at the possibility that MPs may have been misled. Michael Portillo, the former Tory Cabinet minister who effusively praised the Prime Minister in March for renouncing spin to fight for what he believed to be right, has now changed his mind.

Writing in today's Independent on Sunday, Mr Portillo said: "How could I have been so naive? Spin is the making of Blair, and it will be his demise. He's given his opponents a dream slogan - 'You can't believe a word he says'. But that may not worry the Prime Minister.

"The opposition has never shown self-discipline, so maybe he'll give them the slip again."

Other MPs who backed the war have warned that the issue could blow up very quickly into a major constitutional row between the Government and the House of Commons if, as expected, Tony Blair and senior officials refuse a request to give evidence to a committee of MPs.

The Labour chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Donald Anderson, has written to a number of senior politicians and civil servants, warning them that they may be called before committee hearings later this month.

Unlike the Intelligence and Security Committee - a group of MPs appointed by Mr Blair, which meets secretly - the Foreign Affairs Committee will hold its hearings in public and intends to publish its findings before MPs break up for the summer.

A number of the intended witnesses, including Tony Blair himself and some senior figures in the intelligence community, are likely to refuse to appear. The committee could then appeal for support to the House of Commons, forcing a highly embarrassing vote which the Government might lose.

Andrew Mackinlay, a Labour member of the committee who backed the Iraq war, predicted: "They will say they can't give evidence on matters affecting the security services, then either the committee will buckle or - more likely - there will be a major confrontation."

John Maples, a Tory member of the committee who also backed the war, warned: "It would be very embarrassing for the Prime Minister to be taking on a Commons committee, because people would ask, 'What has the Government got to hide?' and second, they might not win a vote."

The continuing instability in Iraq was brought home yesterday when an American soldier was killed and four others wounded in a skirmish involving grenades and small arms fire in Saddam Hussein's home town of Tikrit.

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