

Blair faces two WMD probes

Concession on inquiry undercut by decision of foreign affairs committee to examine the issue

By Christopher Adams,
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Tony Blair is facing two parliamentary inquiries into allegations that he exaggerated intelligence claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

In an attempt to win some breathing space in a bitter row, the prime minister will today promise full co-operation with an investigation by a government appointed committee of MPs, to be carried out in private, into the intelligence used to make the case for war.

However, Downing Street hopes that this concession would defuse the row that has engulfed Westminster and divided the Labour party were immediately dealt a blow when the Commons foreign affairs committee announced a separate inquiry that will hear evidence in public.

Mr Blair is expected today to face a sustained onslaught from all sides of the House when he makes his first Commons appearance since Downing Street was accused of exaggerating intelligence claims.

He will use prime minister's

questions to announce that he has agreed to the inquiry by the intelligence and security committee (ISC) of senior parliamentarians. The cross-party committee, whose reports are often censored, oversees MI6, MI5 and GCHQ. It has access to sensitive material and senior intelligence officials, and can call ministers to account.

John Reid, leader of the House, told the Times he believed "rogue elements" in the intelligence services were responsible for the "uncorroborated briefings" that have fuelled media accusations.

Mr Blair's co-operation with

the ISC is unlikely to go far enough to appease Labour rebels and the Liberal Democrats, who are demanding a fully independent inquiry into the claim that Iraq possessed WMD that could be deployed within 45 minutes.

The ISC, chaired by Labour's Ann Taylor, will examine allegations that officials at Number 10 "sexed up" intelligence information to strengthen the case for military action. It could also look at the wider question of how the intelligence compared with the reality on the ground in Iraq.

Nearly two months after Sad-

dam Hussein was toppled, the failure to find the weapons has led to pressure on the government to disclose fully the intelligence used to support its decision to overthrow the Iraqi regime.

Downing Street yesterday repeated its denials that it meddled with intelligence and insisted there was no need for an independent inquiry.

The Lib Dems have canvassed Labour MPs to gain cross-party backing for their resolution in a Commons debate to be initiated by the party today and intended to interrogate the government over WMD intelligence.

More than 50 Labour MPs have signed a motion demanding pub-

lication of the evidence on Iraqi weapons.

Iain Duncan Smith, who supported the Iraq conflict, stopped short of calling for an independent inquiry. But, in a letter to the prime minister last night, he urged Mr Blair to answer comprehensively the allegations.

The prime minister stands to lose the trust of 23 per cent of people if no WMD are found, according to a Sky News/YouGov poll today, with 60 per cent saying the controversy would influence their vote at the next general election.

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