

Split Commons committee serves up another 'complete Horlicks'

All sides can drink as much, or as little, of the WMD dossier report as they want, says James Blitz

Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, recently described the "dodgy dossier" compiled by Downing Street on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction as "a complete Horlicks". The same phrase would serve equally well to describe yesterday's long-awaited report from the Commons foreign affairs select committee on the government's decision to go to war with Saddam Hussein.

For the past few weeks the 11 members of the cross-party committee led by Donald Anderson, have grappled with one of the most important questions that has faced a British government in years. But large chunks of their evidence and judgments were leaked before publication. And on some of the most sensitive issues – including the question of whether to publish the report at all – the committee failed to reach consensus and split along party political lines.

The result is that yesterday's report amounted to a cup of Horlicks from which the government, the BBC and the intelligence services could drink as much, or as little, as they wanted.

Alastair Campbell, the prime minister's media chief, declared that the BBC's '45 minutes' allegation had been judged "untrue". The BBC in turn could claim that the committee only came to this verdict after a party political split.

Robin Cook, who resigned



Donald Anderson, chairman of the Commons foreign affairs committee that delivered a rap on the knuckles to Downing Street, but no body blow

Reuters

apologetic part of the report that warned there would continue to be "no quiet and unease" about the September dossier until WMDs were found in Iraq. Meanwhile the Lib and Democrats could argue that only an independent judicial inquiry could deliver a coherent judgment.

Beneath all the spinning and party political manoeuvring, the report ended up being more critical than Downing Street had anticipated. It was "untrue" for Mr

Campbell to claim that Iraq imported uranium from Africa was "very odd". And then there is the great row between Mr Campbell and the BBC. It still appeared deadlocked last night – but Mr Blair's spinmeister now seems willing to let it run into the sands. There is just enough lan-

guage in the report to let him claim vindication. But a poll in the Mail on Sunday points to the risk for Downing Street if he fights on. Asked whether they trusted Mr Campbell to tell the truth, 36 per cent of voters said "Yes". Asked whether they trusted the BBC to tell the truth, a resounding 66 per cent answered in the affirmative. Downing Street knows the battle with the Beeb is one it cannot win in the eyes of the electorate. If that battle is about to

fade, two others remain. First – as the report warns – the government will be under pressure over WMDs as long as the US and UK fail to find any evidence on the ground. Second, there is no chance of respite on the question of the origins of the war while the situation in Iraq remains unstable.

This has been a bruising affair for all the institutions involved. Downing Street has come under attack for the way it runs the intelligence services. The BBC has

been scrutinised over its journalistic procedures. And it is not much better for the foreign affairs select committee. For years MPs have complained that parliament must be allowed to hold Mr Blair's government to account. When the prime minister appears before a joint meeting of all of parliament's select committee chiefs this morning, he could be forgiven for wondering whether his inquisitors are little more than party political hacks.

FIN/1/0038 23

3 July 2003