

TRUTH WILL OUT

The Hutton inquiry has marked the end of public trust in Tony Blair, argues Simon Titley

Does Hutton matter? On the face of it, the whole Kelly/Hutton episode seems absurd. One sloppy piece of reporting at 6am on the 'Today' programme leads to a major political crisis with long-lasting repercussions.

Technically, the Hutton inquiry was a sideshow because its remit was narrow, restricted to the reasons for David Kelly's suicide rather than the reasons for war. But the inquiry was significant because of what it has revealed about the prevailing culture of government, and because of how it has eroded popular trust in government.

The conflict between the government and the BBC is not transient but had been brewing for some time and is a symptom of a deeper malaise. The crisis was sparked not by the war itself but by the way in which the British government attempted to justify its involvement. The government's actual motives would have commanded neither public consent nor legal justification, so pretexts were sought. The gradual leakage of the truth is why, regardless of Hutton, the issue won't go away.

The real reasons for the Iraq war are now emerging. Former US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, via Ron Suskind's recent book 'The Price of Loyalty', has revealed how the Bush administration decided to attack Iraq from the outset. September 11 subsequently provided a handy excuse and ensured public consent within the US.

Britain's involvement is more complex. Blair's basic motivation was realpolitik. He is an Atlanticist, who sees Britain's role as a 'bridge' between the US and Europe and rejects the idea that Britain must choose between one and the other. Bush's determination to go to war, regardless of international law or opinion, risked undermining this policy. Blair calculated that only by supporting Bush could he maintain Britain's role and keep the US within the framework of international institutions.

While Bush could wage war without having to worry unduly about legality or consent, Blair had to construct an elaborate moral and legal defence, hence the botched attempt to win UN support and the insistence on 'weapons of mass destruction' as a justification. Blair's need for legitimacy also required a public relations exercise (including the infamous 'dossier'), which led to conflict with any news media eager to probe behind the official statements.

On the surface, the Hutton report was a victory for Blair because it vindicated the government and focused criticism on the BBC. But, despite the report's conclusions, Blair's reputation continues to sink. To understand why, we need to look at the underlying culture of Blair and New Labour.

Tony Blair's main characteristic is that he has no ideology. It is not simply that he does not carry Labour's historical baggage. He carries no other ideological baggage. He is a technocrat and a managerialist, who believes there is one way to 'get things done' and is

intolerant of anyone who cannot see what he regards as obvious.

A value Blair does share with Old Labour is a belief in the omnipotence of government. If there is any problem, big or small, he believes it is both possible and desirable for central government to fix it. The diminishing returns of a control-freak, target-driven approach to government appear to elude him. Instead, he is consumed by a delusional sense of mission. The worst thing you can do to someone inhabiting a delusional universe is to challenge his delusions.

In politics, it is not enough to do things. You must be seen to be doing them, hence the importance of public relations for any government. But news management is of overriding and obsessive importance to New Labour, for two reasons. First, New Labour is neurotic about the media, because of its long experience of hostility from a predominantly right-wing national press. The general election of 1992 was particularly traumatic in this respect. This neurosis explains why Blair allowed his spokesman Alistair Campbell off the leash.

Second, New Labour copied Bill Clinton's pioneering use of focus groups. This allowed the PR tail to wag the political dog, by subordinating policy decisions to perceptions of public opinion, and by forcing ministers to talk in market-tested slogans. Former spin-doctor Derek Draper joked that "eight people sipping wine in Kettering" were deciding government policy.

Together, these factors explain Blair's need for control, his incomprehension that anyone could query his mission, his determination to punish anyone who steps out of line and his consequent overreaction to the BBC. But there are two other sources of intolerance in New Labour's culture that tend to be overlooked.

One of these is a throwback to the oldest of Old Labour, working class machismo. This is expressed, for example, through a disdain for the environment and civil liberties, both widely seen within the Labour Party as effete issues. When Jack Straw and David Blunkett describe liberals as 'namby pamby', they are articulating an authentic working class tradition. This culture explains why, when challenged by the BBC, Labour's instinctive reaction was to threaten a beating outside in the pub car park.

The other powerful influence on New Labour is the culture of 1970s student politics, where many leading New Labour figures began their political careers (although Blair himself did not indulge). The defining feature of 1970s student politics (and I speak as a first-hand witness) was style over substance. It was like being in the school playground aged 13 or 14, when you invited sneers if you turned up wearing the wrong fashion. Political opinions did not arise from values or any rational debate. They were postures, worn as a fashion statement, enforced through social intimidation. Self-appointed political

fashionistas would declare positions and people 'in' or 'out', without there being any argument. This style continues to inform New Labour's approach. Following the publication of the Hutton report, government spin-doctors casually declared that further discussion of the Iraq war was "boring". Such a snide put-down is typical of this juvenile culture. Among students, it can at least be attributed to immaturity. Among middle-aged men, it is pathetic.

What of the BBC? Why did a single off-the-cuff remark by reporter Andrew Gilligan lead to the biggest crisis in the Corporation's history? The 'dossier' story triggered a conflict that was likely to break out sooner or later in any case.

The immediate cause was Alistair Campbell's increasing anger at the BBC. For some time, Campbell had been bullying BBC reporters and executives for their failure to conform to the government's news agenda. We now know, from Greg Dyke's revelations, the intensity of this campaign of intimidation before and during the Iraq war. Campbell felt personally slighted by the accusation that he had 'sexed up' the dossier, which is why he elevated this dispute onto a higher political plane.

However, Campbell's fury is not by itself an adequate explanation for the crisis surrounding the BBC. There is a wider context of the debate about the future of broadcasting in Britain, a debate that was becoming more heated even before Hutton.

The main element in this debate is the forthcoming BBC charter review and, in particular, the question of the validity of the licence fee as a source of funding. The BBC must serve all licence fee payers to retain public consent for the TV licence. But this obligation places the BBC in a dilemma. When it aims to please everyone, it is accused of chasing ratings and 'dumbing down'. If it attempts to become more specialist, it is accused of elitism and failing to serve the whole public. This is a difficult balancing act and there will always be criticism.

Given how harsh Hutton was on the BBC, it was inevitable that there was an instinct to rally round. Support for the BBC came not just from the chattering classes, who regard it as a cherished institution. Support came also from much of the Tory press, which, faced with a choice between attacking Blair and the BBC, recognised its true enemy.

The transformation of Greg Dyke into a folk hero should not blind us to some serious problems at the BBC. Chief among these is the risk-averse culture of the BBC's TV schedulers. BBC1 is particularly awful at the moment, its schedules filled with formulaic programmes such as makeover shows, while BBC2 has lapsed into populist poll-based formats (such as 'The Big Read' and 'Restoration'), capped this February by the execrable 'What The World Thinks Of God' (One participant in this show, Jonathan Miller, pulled off his microphone and walked off the set. He told the Guardian: "About 20 minutes into the thing, I just thought: I must get out of this, I'm drowning in shit.").

The other major problem with BBC television is the marginalisation of serious political coverage. News bulletins (particularly the 6pm news on BBC1) have adopted more tabloid news values, while current affairs programmes, even the venerable 'Panorama', have been shunted into graveyard slots. This may not matter to most viewers but it does matter to the decision makers. It is not a smart move, when the BBC needs all the political support it can get.

Ironically, the BBC's populism is analogous to New Labour's reliance on focus groups, in which leadership is replaced by followership. In broadcasting, it is reinforced by the misguided cultural relativism that says there are no objective definitions of quality. The BBC needs the courage to pander to its audiences less and challenge them more.

Fortunately, there is still much to celebrate at the BBC. Radio goes from strength to strength, and the depth and breadth of online coverage is superb. Above all, the BBC, through its website and sales of programmes, supplies an unrivalled global shop window for British culture and talent. The break up of the BBC should be resisted because it is inconceivable that the private sector could (or would) match these services. Likewise, a licence-funded public service spread around different broadcasters would lack the critical mass to provide anything other than a ghetto service.

The other major element in the debate about the BBC is the aspiration of commercial broadcasters to neuter or destroy the BBC. Rupert Murdoch makes little secret of his contempt, while other commercial TV executives are becoming more brazen in their criticism.

One could respect the arguments of the commercial broadcasters more if they made any effort to compete with the BBC on quality. But they don't even try. Murdoch's Sky satellite operation makes no programmes at all, good or bad. ITV, following the merger of the constituent companies into one conglomerate, is closing down regional studios and has slashed ITN's budget. Channel 4, once an innovative upmarket channel, now pioneers 'reality TV', while Channel 5 has always been a joke. Most of the new niche channels on satellite and cable bear out the old adage, that less is more.

The renewal of the BBC's charter is an opportunity to review and, ideally, improve what is on offer. But neither New Labour's desire for vengeance nor the commercial sector's self-interest is a valid basis for making any decision.

Tony Blair hoped that the Hutton report would, in trendy parlance, bring 'closure'. But his victory is pyrrhic. The details of the Hutton inquiry have really only ever engaged the chattering classes and most of the population isn't interested. New Labour therefore assumed it could move on, with no lasting consequences.

However, the effect of Hutton on most people is about broad perceptions rather than details. The electorate had a high trust in Blair in 1997 because of the contrast with the Tory sleaze that had gone before. The Kelly/Hutton affair has fatally eroded that trust. The steady drip-drip of fresh revelations makes matters only worse. Despite Blair winning a Hutton report beyond his wildest dreams, his decision to go to war - and the subsequent attempts to conceal the truth - have become the catalyst for the unravelling of the Blair project.

We may take delight in seeing the end of Blair. But something deeper and more worrying has occurred. Hutton has caused further popular disillusionment with politics in general. People's dominant impression of government is one of in-fighting and dissembling. The political culture of New Labour revealed by Hutton is that of testosterone-fuelled adolescents, locking horns in the school playground. It is not a pretty sight.