

Not Fit To Govern

We **criticised** the former Leader of the Conservative Party for engaging in

pointless, opportunistic sniping [...] without bringing to bear any coherent criticism...

Since then, the Conservative Party has elected a new leader, Michael Howard, but the pointless, opportunistic sniping has continued. If anything, it has become worse, with Howard returning to the issue of whether the Prime Minister or the government "sexed up" the dossier on Iraqi weapons, or behaved dishonourably in their treatment of Dr David Kelly.

Now Lord Hutton, after conducting an enquiry of exemplary thoroughness and fairness into these allegations, has delivered a **report** that **absolutely exonerates** Mr Blair, and contains devastating criticisms of the BBC for initiating the whole affair by making "unfounded" allegations against him.

Mr Blair, in accepting the report in Parliament, gave possibly the finest speech of his career.

Mr Howard then had the opportunity to demonstrate leadership, political judgement, and common decency. He failed on all counts. He had previously made numerous allegations of dishonesty against Mr Blair which have now been categorically refuted. A measured apology would not have been out of place, yet far from making one, he actually persevered with similar innuendo. Furthermore, though claiming to accept the conclusions of the Hutton Report, Howard cherry-picked a few incidental remarks in it, and ludicrously took them out of context in order to misinterpret them as supporting this innuendo. To give just one example (§1396 of the report): Lord Hutton said that if various policy decisions by the Ministry of Defence

are looked at in isolation from the surrounding circumstances it would be possible to infer, as some commentators have done, that there was an underhand strategy by the Government to leak Dr Kelly's name to the press in a covert way. For a time at the start of the Inquiry it appeared to me that a case of some strength could be made that there was such a strategy [...]

However as the Inquiry proceeded and I heard more evidence about the surrounding circumstances and the considerations which influenced those in Government I came to the conclusion that the reality was that there was no such underhand strategy.

Howard quoted from the first part of that passage with considerable relish, made no reference to the second, and behaved as though the whole thing constituted a devastating criticism of Mr Blair's integrity.

Michael Howard is not fit to lead a major party; his party is not fit to govern.

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