Tony Blair’s failure to legitimize the Iraq War: A deliberative approach

James Strong
Presented at “Failure and Denial in International Politics”: The Millennium Conference
London, 17 October 2015

1. This paper presents an empirical analysis of Tony Blair’s rhetorical efforts to legitimize British participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

2. It employs a conceptual framework ultimately derived from Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action, as operationalised for the study of international conflict by Corneliu Bjola with his notion of deliberative legitimacy.

3. It begins from a number of starting points.
   a. Firstly it assumes that Blair failed to legitimize the invasion.
   b. Secondly it assumes that Blair’s failure contributed to the sense in this country that the invasion itself failed.
   c. It focuses specifically on communication because that was how Blair approached legitimization efforts. He made public speeches, held press conferences, answered questions from hostile television studio audiences and committees of MPs, released information dossiers and led at least five major parliamentary debates in the pre-invasion period. Blair tried to argue his way to war.
   d. It focuses specifically on Blair because so much contemporary and subsequent commentary focused on Blair. A wider approach looking at how Blair’s audiences received, interpreted and responded to his rhetoric would help explain the legitimacy deficit overall, but might distract from Blair’s personal culpability for it. I’m looking, in other words, at flaws inherent in his communication efforts, rather than trying to trace exactly why they might have failed.

4. In the first section I define legitimacy as an intersubjective sociological phenomenon generated through a particular type of communicative legitimization process.
   a. In other words I define legitimacy in constructivist rather than normative terms. The exercise of power is legitimate, in my view, if society considers it legitimate, rather than because of how closely it meets any particular set of external standards.
   b. I think this is justified because it matches Blair’s approach. The mere fact he spent so long arguing about Iraq implies he thought the question of whether or not the invasion was legitimate could be decided through debate.
   c. Noting Blair’s focus on communication, and also the complaint frequently levied at constructivist approaches to legitimacy, that they deny any objective content to the term, I adopt a deliberative conceptual framework.
   d. Bjola’s notion of deliberative legitimacy uses Habermas’s theory of communicative action to define legitimacy as a social consensus achieved through a legitimization process that meets certain normative criteria. It keeps the constructivist definition of what legitimacy is, in other words, but introduces a normative dimension by defining what counts as a proper legitimization approach.
e. Specifically, deliberative legitimization involves a) truthfulness, b) openness to the widest possible public debate and c) flexibility or the willingness to change position in response to criticism. Over the course of the rest of the paper I assess Blair’s legitimization efforts against each criterion in turn.

5. I find that Blair was reasonably truthful, but within certain boundaries.
   a. He usually said in public what he thought in private. He genuinely believed Iraq was developing WMD.
   b. He was somewhat disingenuous about the legal case for war without a ‘second’ UN Security Council Resolution. In the end the Attorney General agreed a reasonable argument could be made. But for a long time he insisted Britain did need a further resolution. Blair, who disagreed, said publicly that a further resolution was not required.
   c. He was also disingenuous when he blamed France for the fact he failed to get a second SCR. It’s true Chirac threatened to veto. But it’s also true he sent a number of private messages saying he was still open to negotiation.
   d. Blair may have been fairly honest, but his statements were not always accurate. The big claim, that Iraq was developing WMD, proved particularly damaging.
   e. He also failed to give a complete account of his reasoning. He did not reveal how patchy and sporadic the intelligence picture actually was. Nor did he release the Attorney General’s highly nuanced legal judgement. This made his arguments more persuasive in the short term and damaged his credibility (badly) in the long term. Both undermined his claim to deliberative legitimacy.

6. I find that Blair made a number of efforts to facilitate the widest possible public debate, but also that he tried to control the timing and the content of deliberations.
   a. He delayed as long as possible, insisting ‘no decisions have been taken’ about military action. That is a problem because it meant refusing to discuss issues many public actors wanted to discuss.
   b. It is also a problem because it was not entirely true. Blair knew before he met President Bush in Texas in April 2002 that he would support a confrontation with Saddam Hussein, and that any confrontation that began with diplomacy would end in war. As this became increasingly obvious during the summer of 2002, it damaged Blair’s credibility.
   c. Blair also drew explicitly on his own formal authority as prime minister, and on the formal authority of the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Attorney-General to shore up arguments that could not necessarily stand up on their own. This probably made Blair’s arguments more persuasive, but also less deliberative.

7. Finally, I find that Blair showed limited flexibility in response to other actors’ arguments. Though he talked about deliberation, what he really wanted was for others to accept his particular point of view.
   a. This comes through especially clearly when we look at how he presented the moral case for war. Jonathan Powell joked that Blair had a ‘Messiah complex’, a belief that he and he alone could save the world.
   b. One aid later remarked that Blair was a man who considered his own moral judgement better than that of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal of
Westminster and the Pope. All three spoke out against him and he did not change his view.
c. Again, Blair’s inflexibility made his arguments more persuasive – under this heading especially so. It also damaged his claim to legitimacy in deliberative terms.

8. In conclusion, I find Blair is personally responsible for his failure to legitimize the Iraq War.
a. He claimed he sought legitimacy through deliberation, but he did not act that way.
b. He acted like he was more interested in persuasion, and even then he failed.

9. Interestingly, Blair failed to persuade in large part for the same reasons he failed to secure deliberative legitimacy. Because he was not sufficiently truthful, open and flexible. The relationship is not absolute. But I believe it is sufficiently strong to show the deliberative approach to studying legitimization has empirical value.