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SYNOTT & STEELE DISCUSS 'IMPERIAL OCCUPATION' OF IRAQ

Leading British diplomat, Sir Hilary Synott and Guardian correspondent Jonathan Steele criticised the lack of planning for occupation and accused the Government of ignoring Arabist expert advice prior to the invasion of Iraq, at the Edinburgh International Book Festival today. Marking the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, the speakers discussed the "Armchair Government" where ministers had no organised briefing structure and felt that much of the planning was done 'on the fly'.

They discussed what went wrong, whilst the invasion was thought to be a success and Saddam was removed from power, the subsequent occupation has not worked. Steele commented that it was interesting that the two countries with the longest history of interference in the Middle East for their own ends – Britain and America - expected to be welcomed into Iraq. They both noted that the lack of either a British or American Embassy in the country following the first Iraq war in 1991 had resulted in no expertise on the ground, and a total lack of understanding at Government level of the implications of removing Saddam and of the effects of twelve years of UN sanctions.

Steele commented that whilst the death of Saddam had been widely welcomed it didn't translate into gratitude to the occupiers. The failure to produce essential services, and no firm date for withdrawal from the US Government has resulted in this being perceived on the ground as an imperial occupation.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival continues until Monday 25 August with speakers including Tony Benn, three times Booker winner, and 2008 Booker nominee Salman Rushdie and the launch of Sean Connery's book still to come. Full details of all events can be found on www.edbookfest.co.uk.

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