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## Labour blocks extradition of Iraqi tycoon

French authorities furious at refusal to deport fraud case billionaire

**Martin Bright and Antony Barnett**

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[The Observer](#)

Investigators working on the biggest fraud trial in French history have called for the extradition of a British-based Iraqi billionaire with links to the Blair government.

Opposition MPs have demanded a full explanation for Britain's refusal to deport Nadhmi Auchi, one of Britain's richest men, who was once a senior official in the Iraqi oil ministry.

The French magistrate leading the investigation, Renaud van Ruymbeke, is furious with the British authorities for failing to deliver Auchi.

Questions will also be raised over the precise nature of the billionaire's relationship with the Baghdad regime. The Observer has discovered that Auchi met Saddam's number two, Tariq Aziz, as recently as last October at a gala dinner in Beirut. But Auchi also has links with British intelligence, through the former senior MI6 officer Anthony Cavendish, who acts a consultant to Auchi's business empire.

An international arrest warrant was issued for Auchi three years ago, after he was alleged to have received a multi-

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million-franc kickback from the oil giant Elf-Aquitaine during the sale of a Spanish refinery. The Interpol arrest warrant issued by the French in 2000 states that Auchi is suspected of 'complicity in the misuse of company assets and receiving embezzled company assets'.

In March he is due to stand trial for his role in the affair, but has refused to go to France for questioning. The Government's refusal to deport Auchi flies in the face of legislation going through Parliament to introduce a fast-track extradition process to all European countries.

Liberal Democrat Home Affairs spokesman Simon Hughes said: 'This failure to extradite seems to undermine all the strong statements by the Government about the need for solidarity across Europe in enforcing criminal justice. At the very moment that the new extradition Bill is going through Parliament, making the case for more streamlined measures, there should be an immediate explanation why the principles are not being applied in this case.'

Despite continued questions about his relationship with Baghdad, Auchi remains well placed to act as a middle-man in any negotiations with Western companies over Iraq's oil fields. Sources close to his empire claim that Tony Blair met him to discuss Iraq shortly before his Christmas holiday in Egypt. A Downing Street spokesman said: 'We have no record of a meeting with the Prime Minister.' But he said that he could not rule out the possibility that they may have met socially.

In April 1999, Science Minister Lord Sainsbury presented Auchi with a painting of the Commons, signed by Blair and leading parliamentarians, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Auchi's General Mediterranean Holdings.

- ▶ Sainsbury later said he did this as a favour for the controversial former Minister Keith Vaz, who acted as
- ▶ Auchi's political fixer. As a junior Foreign Office Minister, Vaz made inquiries about the extradition procedure after a request for help from Auchi.

Auchi's relationship with the Iraq regime has always been shrouded in mystery. He came to Britain in the early 1980s after falling out of favour with the Saddam regime.

He claims that two of his brothers were killed by the Iraqi dictator, but, in the early years of the Ba'athist revolution, he was in a senior position in Baghdad. While in

exile, Auchinleck received a \$16.5 million (£10m) commission on an Italo-French bid to build a pipeline for Saddam in 1986, say Italian fraud investigators.

Auchinleck is Britain's 13th richest man, with an estimated £1.2 billion hotel and shipping empire. The opening of his latest venture, Le Royal, a luxury hotel in the Jordanian capital, Amman, modelled on a famous Iraqi spiral minaret, was attended by King Abdullah and the speaker of the Scottish Parliament, Sir David Steel.

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