British Parliament rubber-stamps war

Chris Marsden
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On Tuesday evening the Labor government in Britain secured a massive parliamentary majority for military action against Iraq. Despite claims that Britain was pursuing all diplomatic channels, the government's motion made clear that the end result would be air strikes. In moving it, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook went so far as to warn of a nuclear attack on Baghdad.

Only 25 MPs voted against the government—mainly from the left wing of the Labour Party, as well as three Welsh nationalists.

Overall the occasion was a breathtaking exercise in cynicism. The result of the only debate on war that will be called in the "mother of all parliaments" was a foregone conclusion. Its sole purpose was to pronounce a final benediction on the weeks of war preparations by the British establishment and its media.

The proceedings were a travesty of the democratic process. A proposed amendment by Labour MPs Tony Benn and Tam Dalyell calling for opposition to "any military action not explicitly authorized by the (UN) Security Council" was rejected by the Speaker, Betty Boothroyd, and could not be voted on.

In contrast, a Tory amendment that "fully supports the resolve of the government to use all necessary means to achieve an outcome consistent with" UN resolutions was accepted by the Blair government and incorporated into its resolution.

Labor, Tory and Liberal Democrat politicians rose up to proclaim their unanimity with the British and American stance. John Major, Tory Prime Minister during the last Gulf War, backed the government and called for "massive retaliation if Iraq attacked a third country like Israel."

This elicited Cook's threat of a nuclear strike in the event of Saddam Hussein using chemical weapons. The base level of discussion was exemplified when Cook said the threat of retaliation with chemical and biological weapons by Hussein was "low," but that such an outcome would prove that Iraq possesses such weapons.

Shadow Foreign Secretary Michael Howard was questioned on the fact that Iraq's chemical weapons program was developed with the previous Tory government's assistance. He replied that it was often very difficult to distinguish between chemical materials that could be used in medicine and those which could be turned into weapons.

In fact, the Tory government was never in any doubt that it was supplying arms to Iraq. Moreover, Howard's defense of past British policy toward Iraq belies the current justification for military strikes, which is based on the claim that virtually every chemical substance held by Iraq can be used for the creation of "weapons of mass destruction."

In their speeches and proposed amendments the government's opponents confined themselves to a timid appeal for military action to be made contingent on official sanction from the United Nations Security Council. Benn said, "It would be the greatest betrayal of all if we voted to abandon the (UN) Charter and take unilateral action."

Benn knows full well that the UN is hardly a vehicle for opposing military action, and that the last Gulf War took place under its auspices. One of his concerns is that Britain's own strategic interests are being damaged through Labor's subordination to a US agenda.

At an earlier point he cited the danger of damaging political repercussions at home, saying, "I fear that this could end in a tragedy even for the American and British governments. Suez and Vietnam are not far from the minds of anyone who has any sense of history."

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