

British Liberal media and ex-radicals declare support for bombing of Kosovo

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Though the Labour government again refused to allow a vote on NATO's war against Serbia at the end of a parliamentary debate on Thursday, March 25, this would have been won comfortably. There was near unanimity on the Labour benches and the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats both pledged their support.

Despite this, concern has been expressed, both by supporters and opponents of the NATO action, over the absence of any long-term political and military strategy. The Blair government has distinguished itself over the past two years by acting as the most servile ally of the US government, repeatedly demonstrating its willingness to participate directly in American military operations. But this is as far as Blair's foreign policy extends. He has refused to countenance any discussion over what follows on from air strikes against Serbia, let alone consider the implications of the Balkan events for the future stability of Europe.

Official opposition to the war has been marginalised. It is made up of a small group of Labour left-wingers, including Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn. And also includes elder statesmen from within the Labour and Conservative parties, like former Labour Chancellor Lord (Dennis) Healy, Labour Lord Hugh Jenkins of Putney, who resigned the party whip over the issue, former Conservative Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington and hard-line right-winger Alan Clarke.

These disparate forces are united by a common concern that Blair is ceding traditional British interests to US foreign policy, and, more fundamentally, is threatening the stability of Europe. Benn said of the NATO action, "We are witnessing a war to control the Balkans.... I think this is a war of aggression. NATO is being set up now to replace the UN. That's what this is about."

Alan Clarke, outlined the which the war in Kosovo could provoke all-out war in Europe. He concluded that following "an escalation of aerial bombardment ... it will then be put about by tame commentators, docile back-benchers, and CIA remittance-men, that some kind of intervention 'on the ground' is, first inevitable, then desirable.... What is for sure is that the abstract concept of human rights will have faded a very long way out of sight".

As someone with a track record of hostility to the US, Clarke has his own political axe to grind. Nevertheless, he pointed to the most significant feature of the last days--the near universal support for war by liberal and social democratic opinion.

He commented caustically, "What amazes me about the Yugoslav crisis is the credulity of the Left, and of progressive thinkers, who seem to get a vicarious thrill from seeing B52s taking off from Fairford.

"I address them: How have you swallowed whole the CIA-funded propaganda that demonises the Serbs? Are you not familiar with the duplicity and intimidation of United States foreign policy? That Ambassador Walker, in charge of monitoring forces in Bosnia, was financing the Contras? Have you no recall of that 'Free World' crap that embraced Battista, Noriega, Syngman Rhee, Bao Dai, Lee Van Thieu and Sukarno?"

An example of what Clarke was referring to was given in the same day's *Observer* editorial, headlined "There is no alternative to this war". Answering those who criticise the war for "allegedly inconsistent standards", it replied, "we say so what? ... We have to live in the world as it is, not some Utopia."

Guardian journalist Jonathan Freedland wrote on Thursday, March 25, "The old left needs to look at the world that's actually taking shape. Wednesday's Lords ruling on Pinochet suggests a new brand of

international law, one that doesn't allow heads of state to kill and maim indiscriminately, even within their own sovereign lands. The night-sky over Belgrade tells the same story. Together they're making the world a less cosy place for dictators--and safer for the weak and powerless."

How can one account for such statements? The Blair government has sought to make cynical use of public outrage over the horrors of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. But it remains the case that similar and worse atrocities throughout the world never in the past led so many in politics and the media who define themselves as progressive to place the mantle of legitimacy over military action by the imperialist powers. Yet since the first Balkan war in 1991, humanitarian considerations have been cited by broad layers of former liberals and radicals to justify renouncing their previous pacifist or anti-imperialist stance and embrace support for war. This is despite the fact that the Dayton Agreement and the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, which they endorsed, has only stoked up nationalist sentiment and ethnic violence in the Balkans.

In the aftermath of the abject failure of the old reformist policies of the Labour Party and the collapse of the Stalinist regimes, these layers have concluded that any opposition to imperialism is indeed a utopia. For decades, the radical petty bourgeois viewed political life through the prism of the powerful social democratic and Stalinist apparatus that dominated the workers movement. Hostile to any genuinely independent struggle by the working class, they regarded these bureaucracies both as safeguards against the worst excesses of imperialism and as a force for social order in their policing of the class struggle. The collapse of these political relations has not only produced a stampede to the right without precedent in political history; it has also led to a breakdown of any semblance of critical thought.

They regard the economic and political might of the imperialists today as the only thing standing between humanity and chaos. All that can be done is to pressurise the political and military elites to use their power "wisely". The link made between the fate of Pinochet--a dictator installed by US imperialism--and the bombing of Belgrade by American stealth bombers expresses this most clearly. As Freedland declared, the "crude brand of anti-Americanism may have worked

during the Cold War, but not now."

The consequences of war in the Balkans are incalculable and the justification for the present military action nakedly transparent. Former *Independent* editor Andrew Marr, himself an ex-radical, commented, "It is time, I think, for this country to know just what it is fighting in the Balkans for. We are not fighting to prevent the quick slaughter or 'cleansing' of Albanian Kosovars. Our bombing is making that worse, not better; you can't police anywhere from three thousand feet up. We are not fighting to protect a sovereign state, as in the Gulf--in fact we are fighting to tear one in two. We are not fighting, I take it, to calm down Serb nationalism, for that is intensifying. We are not fighting to help the Serbian democratic opposition (if so, we are having the opposite effect). We are not fighting because we believe in Albanian nationalism--or at least, we never did before. Ironies abound."

Still, Marr remains a supporter of both the Blair government and the NATO intervention.

Utilising the political vacuum left by the abject capitulation of the official left, the most vociferous proponents of imperialist intervention are formulating their own answer to Marr's question. The Liberal Democrats and sections of the Tory right are mounting an increasingly vocal campaign to demand the use of ground troops and the establishment of a permanent NATO protectorate in Kosovo. Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown first made this demand in Thursday's parliamentary debate, but it has now been taken up by the most authoritative journals of the British establishment, the *Telegraph*, the *Times* and the *Economist* --a call that was itself pioneered by the *Guardian*.



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