

British Labour's elder statesman embraces NATO bombing of Serbia

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The support of centre-left governments, liberals and former pacifists for the US-NATO aerial bombardment of Serbia is one of the most politically significant aspects of the current war.

Strictly speaking, Roy Hattersley, a former deputy leader of the British Labour Party, does not fall into this category. For much of his 35-year membership of the Labour Party, Hattersley was firmly on its right. He formed the right-wing half of the so-called "dream ticket" for the Labour leadership in 1983, along with the more left-leaning Neil Kinnock. This marked the beginning of the party's campaign to ditch its programme of social reforms and embrace free-market policies. Tony Blair and "New Labour" are the end product of this process.

Despite this, so thoroughgoing has Labour's evolution been that Hattersley is now described as a "left". His protestations that under Blair Labour has turned its back on its former working class base has marked him out as one of the few dissenting voices within the party. He has also come to be regarded as one of the last of Labour's "elder statesmen". Today, Labourite politics have been cleansed of any sense of history or principles. Its right-wing policies are presented in vacuous soundbites. Having spent almost four decades as a career politician, Hattersley is seen as an counterweight to the New Labour milieu and is sought out by the media to provide a "voice of experience".

But a week is a long time in politics, as one of Hattersley's mentors, former Labour leader Harold Wilson, once said. That is all it has taken to expose how rotten the foundations of Hattersley's supposed intellectual independence are.

In his "Endpiece" column in the March 29 *Guardian*, "Snake oil salesmen", Hattersley was running true to type. He expressed, in his usual mealy-mouthed way,

his qualms about the NATO action against Serbia.

"One of the many advantages of no longer being an active politician, is the right that status provides not to have a firm opinion on great issues," he wrote. Previously, as the MP for a Birmingham constituency, he may have had to answer questions from angry Serbs regarding his attitude to NATO's bombing and whether he considered cruise missiles the "right way" to solve the crisis. Under these conditions, he wrote, "I would have looked shifty and mumbled".

Hattersley reassured readers of the *Guardian*, which fanatically supports the bombing of Serbia and the use of ground troops, that he remained "on balance on the side" of Clinton. But he also sought to explain why he remains uneasy about the NATO action. He concluded that it was the outcome of "that dangerous thing, a little learning". He had, for example, just finished reading how present-day politicians--such as Clinton and Blair--rely on "slick" presentation of policies to trick the people. This insight had made him very cautious about the "snake oil salesmen".

Such qualms were forgotten by the time Hattersley wrote his next "Endpiece". Under the title "Doubling up in defence", he states, "My own doubts about the bombing--expressed in this column last week--have been completely removed by seven days of pictures.... Whether or not we should have started the war, we clearly have to finish it. That must be obvious to everyone who owns a television set."

Hattersley's comments are a damning indictment of his own intellectual bankruptcy, and that of the political milieu he represents. Here is someone who prides himself on being a "cut above" the average Labour politician--someone with a sense of world history and even some understanding of Balkan politics. Yet this, and decades of political experience, apparently count

for nothing when measured against the pictures of ethnic Albanian refugees that dominate the war propaganda of the British media and the Labour government.

Of course, Hattersley's explanation for his "change of heart" is unconvincing. He has been a stalwart defender of the interests of British imperialism throughout his long career and remains so on this question. Nonetheless, the fact that he can cite the "slick" media presentation he derided just one week earlier as reason to forget his "little learning" speaks volumes about the man himself and the debased character of the Labour Party.

Based on such an argument, can we assume that, had Hattersley viewed Leni Riefenstahl's paeon to Nazism, "Triumph of the Will", in 1930s Germany he would have just as easily donned the swastika?



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