

Britain: Why Blair is backing the US war drive

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On Tuesday, Prime Minister Tony Blair finally agreed to convene parliament for one day on October 4 in order to hold a debate on military preparations against Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding the claims that President Bush's international coalition against terrorism is seeking to defend the principles of freedom and democracy, the military build-up in Britain has seen the Labour government ride roughshod over every norm of democratic accountability.

The decision to commit the UK to support an open-ended military engagement in the Middle East with every available means has been reached by the prime minister almost single-handedly. Blair has taken upon himself virtually presidential powers and is largely working outside of the control of parliament and even his own cabinet. Since the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington, Britain's parliament has been recalled just once from its summer recess, on September 14, and then only for a set-piece debate.

Operating behind the backs of the British people, the prime minister and a coterie of handpicked advisers got their decisions rubber-stamped by several parliamentary committees in the confines of Downing Street. Earlier this week, Blair convened a meeting with 35 MPs from all three main parties who sit on the home affairs, foreign defence and intelligence committees. According to press reports, the MPs were briefed on the latest developments, including the fact that Britain's intelligence services had drawn up their own evidence of Osama bin Laden's involvement in the attack on the World Trade Centre. However, none of those who attended—including Bruce George, chairman of the defence select committee—were shown this evidence. Nor were they informed what role British servicemen and women would play in any military action, or its timing.

Despite this, all of the assembled MPs declared themselves wholly satisfied with the preparations being made for war.

As a largely servile media fashions Blair's every pronouncement into easily digestible soundbites, virtually every official arena of political debate is being closed down. Following the decision by the Trade Union Congress to abandon its annual conference the day after the terror attacks, the Labour Party has announced that its own conference, due to start next week, will be reduced to just two-days of set piece

speeches. According to Labour, the current situation is so grave that it is inappropriate to continue with party conferences, which might be the scene of political differences and confrontation. Instead, the conference will end next Wednesday, and parliament will reassemble the following day.

The Conservative Party immediately announced that its own conference would be curtailed, with new leader Iain Duncan Smith seeking to trump Blair by demanding that parliament should not be convened in advance of any military engagement, so as to ensure the MPs would have something to discuss!

The depth of Labour's contempt for the parliamentary process is thrown into stark relief when one considers the apocalyptic statements that have been issued over the past period. The government has called on Britons to be prepared to make "enormous" sacrifices. Ministers have warned gravely of the possibility of sustaining numerous casualties, while Blair has declared the UK to be "terror target number two" after the US, and hospitals have been placed on heightened alert. Military historian General Sir John Keegan has forecast ominously that "It's going to be like the Second World War for ever and ever and ever", and extra police are being drafted into the capital. The mass media has been dominated by scare stories about the risk of biological and chemical attacks on Britain's cities, prompting such a rush for gas masks that national supplies have been sold out.

Accompanying the abandonment of basic parliamentary norms are plans to dispense with civil liberties long regarded as inviolable. Ministers claim that the "war against terrorism" now justifies bypassing sections of recently introduced human rights legislation, in order to grant extraordinary powers to the state. Under consideration are measures enabling the authorities to routinely monitor all communications and powers to ban organisations arbitrarily deemed to be involved in terrorism. Labour is also pressing ahead with plans to introduce compulsory identity cards, which have met fierce opposition on every other occasion.

What accounts for Blair's cynical indifference towards the basic rights and legitimate concerns of working people?

One cannot underestimate Blair's political arrogance. Labour's pro-business policies and attacks on the welfare system draw on the support of a small layer of the upper middle

classes, whose interests are diametrically opposed to the mass of working people and whose wealthy lifestyle encourages the narrowest political focus and disdain for those less well off.

The collapse of any effective opposition by the parliamentary parties and above all the prostration of the trade unions has for some time given a free hand to the government to act as it sees fit. But Blair's enthusiastic whipping up of jingoism and his eagerness to suppress democratic rights takes place under conditions of dwindling support for the Labour government, as expressed in the historic low turn out in June's general election.

Having secured a second term in office, however, Blair made clear his government would not retreat, announcing a sweeping programme of privatisation, particularly in health and education. Combined with growing evidence that the UK economy was heading for recession, these deeply unpopular measures had led many to forecast that the government was in for a rocky time.

Blair is using the events of September 11 in the same way as Thatcher did the Falklands/Malvinas conflict in the 1980s—as a golden opportunity to drape himself in the Union Jack, to appear strong and resolute on the international arena and to cite the national interest in order to demand an end to opposition to his domestic policies. This week, for example, Chancellor Gordon Brown insisted that public spending be held down in order to finance the war against terrorism.

The prime minister's whistle-stop tour last week of Paris, Berlin and Washington, as well as his reported discussions with numerous other world leaders, won him accolades as “Bulldog Blair” and “Winston Churchill mark 2”. According to the British press, Blair is a trouble-shooter—they have even nicknamed him “the Persuader”—playing a pivotal role in securing and consolidating international support behind Washington's anti-terror coalition.

However, the other major factor behind Blair's efforts to hitch his political wagon to Bush's warhorse is the attempt to overcome the crisis facing British foreign policy.

Labour came to power more than four years ago with a mandate from the dominant sections of the ruling class to resolve the intractable foreign policy conflicts that had virtually destroyed the Conservative Party. Foremost amongst these was the need to secure Britain's position within the European Union by adopting the single European currency, the euro. However, Blair's government has instead remained outside the euro zone and appears prostrate before the rightwing anti-Euro press. Labour's foreign policy has largely consisted of aligning the UK firmly with America on every issue, from Iraq to Ireland, in order to be able to punch above its weight when faced with the economic and political challenge from Britain's main European rivals, Germany and France.

As long as President Clinton was in power, this strategy paid dividends and Blair could proclaim their common commitment to the politics of the “Third Way,” to reinforce the so-called

“special relationship” between the two countries. After the rightwing cabal around George W. Bush stole the presidential election in November last year and made clear its intention to pursue a more aggressively mono-polar foreign policy, Blair feared being left out in the cold by both Europe and the US. Bush's pronouncement only a few weeks ago that Mexico was America's greatest friend only fuelled concerns within British ruling circles that Blair had made a disastrous political miscalculation by not siding more firmly with the European powers.

Blair therefore seized on the September 11 events to prove his loyalty to the Bush presidency by being the foremost advocate of any action the White House saw fit to carry out. Bush's statement that the US had no greater ally than Britain, and his reference to his “friend” Blair, caused the prime minister to puff out his chest and gave the press occasion to wax lyrical about Britain's international role as a “bridge” between Europe and America.

As on other occasions, Britain's fulsome support for, and participation in military interventions provides an international veneer to what is fundamentally a US initiative. To a greater degree than ever before, however, the US has publicly reserved its right to act unilaterally whenever and wherever it sees fit. If Britain is prepared to accept these terms, then this is fine as far as the White House is concerned. If not...

Earlier this week, the deputy chief of defence staff, General Sir Anthony Piggott, returned from Washington proclaiming that he had “detailed plans” of America's intentions, for the scrutiny of the British government. It transpired later that all he had brought back was a list of US requirements regarding personnel and equipment to be deployed by Britain.

The blank cheque Blair has given to the Bush administration is already creating nervousness amongst a significant section of the establishment. Whether America's star waxes or wanes, they fear that Britain's own strategic interests in the Middle East, in Europe and throughout the world may be gravely undermined.



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