Britain: Blair outlines his imperial mission

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's speech to the Labour Party conference this week sounded as if it were delivered by a man who was politically and psychologically unhinged. Yet, with few exceptions, the mass media in Britain and throughout the world hailed his speech as a career-best and lauded Blair himself as a politician of Churchillian stature.

Support stretched across the political spectrum of official opinion in Britain. On the conservative right, the *Daily Mail* called it "one of the most impressive speeches Mr Blair has made". The usually pro-Tory *Telegraph* said that Blair had delivered a "presidential" speech and done so "brilliantly". But the liberal left's reaction was even more enthusiastic. The *Guardian* called the speech, "a defining statement... intellectually ambitious and formidable." The *Independent* called it, "the most statesmanlike and mature he has delivered in seven years as leader." The *Mirror* called it "an extraordinary, emotional and visionary view of the future... we at *The Mirror* feel proud to have a man like that leading our country in this troubled time."

America's CNN broadcast Blair's speech live around the world. In Australia, it was also shown live on late-night television. Former Labor Senator Graeme Richardson, who hosts a Sydney radio show, told his audience, "We are looking here at the true leader of the world... That speech stamps him as the great leader of the new millennium."

Italy's *Corriere della Sera* said, "If there was ever any need for someone to keep the alliance between Europe and America against terrorism who better than the British Prime Minister?"

Clearly there was a receptive audience for Blair's message, despite a display of messianic fervour bordering on egomania. Why is this?

In the first instance, Blair was given such a rapturous reception because his speech was a declaration of war against Afghanistan. Blair piled on the warrior rhetoric: "This is a battle with only one outcome: our victory not theirs... There is no diplomacy with Bin Laden or the Taliban regime... There is no compromise possible... Just a choice: defeat it or be defeated by it." And finally, "I say to the Taliban: surrender the terrorists; or surrender power. It's your choice."

His speech was delivered amidst press reports that the Bush administration had been forced to put off plans to attack Afghanistan due to fear of losing the support of the Arab regimes. So for the most bellicose sections of the bourgeoisie, particular in the US, it must have sounded a reassuring clarion call: Don't worry, everything is still on course. War will take place.

But Blair went much further in his speech than Bush and other leading US politicians—anxious at this point to maintain international consensus—would have dared. For he proposed nothing less than to utilise the military and economic might of the Western powers assembled under the so-called international coalition against terrorism as the starting point for the reorganisation of the entire world.

His words dripped with the type of cynical moralising employed in the nineteenth century to legitimise the imperial ambitions of the liberal bourgeoisie, but this time dressed up in modern polemical garb. Whereas his predecessors would have cited the need to take up the "white man's burden" and bring Christianity and civilization to the heathen masses, Blair spoke of creating "hope amongst all nations", "a new beginning", "greater understanding between nations and between faiths; and above all justice and prosperity for the poor and dispossessed". There was no limit to his ambitions. On the basis of a mutual abhorrence of terrorism, it would now be possible to bring together "Jews, Muslims and Christians" because according to the Reverend Blair, all are the "children of Abraham".

The "power of the international community" is asserting itself, Blair proclaimed, insisting that in the era of globalisation "conflicts rarely stay within national boundaries" and financial "confidence is global". On this basis, Blair made a direct appeal to the latent fears of the middle classes, of the type long employed by far-right demagogues. "Today the threat is chaos," he warned, because "for people with work to do, family life to balance, mortgages to pay, careers to further, pensions to provide, the yearning is for order and stability and if it doesn't exist elsewhere, it is unlikely to exist here."

In pursuit of global stability, however, sugary phrases about universal brotherhood soon give way to a more pragmatic assertion that the West must seize the moment to reorder the world in the interests of capital and must employ every weapon at its disposal in order to do so—both military and economic.

According to Blair, this had been done successfully in Yugoslavia with the bringing down of the Milosevic regime and must now be carried out in Africa and the Middle East, and closer to home in Northern Ireland.

Blair promised many by now traditional palliatives, such as

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writing off "Third World debt", but the thrust of his speech sought to legitimise direct interference by the West in African affairs. Blair stated that the West must help with "good governance and infrastructure", and training soldiers in "conflict resolution". In return, he demands "true democracy, no more excuses for dictatorship, abuses of human rights; no tolerance of bad governance, from the endemic corruption of some states, to the activities of Mr Mugabe's henchmen in Zimbabwe." Any government deemed to be acting contrary to the interests of the Western powers can easily be said to have transgressed such standards. And what is considered legitimate? Countries with "Proper commercial, legal and financial systems", i.e. ones prepared to abide by the dictates of the IMF and World Bank, and "the will, with our help, to broker agreements for peace and provide troops to police them."

Blair finished his speech with a call to action. "This is a moment to seize. The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us."

The prime minister hopes to ride a wave of popularity as the self-proclaimed captain of Britain's ship in these troubled waters, to push through measures that have hitherto met with opposition. He even raised the possibility of holding a referendum on adopting the euro within the lifetime of the present parliament, despite the deep divisions on this question that continue to plague Britain's ruling elite.

With respect to domestic policy, Blair announced that people must accept the curtailing of democratic rights in the name of combating terrorism—"laws will be changed, not to deny basic liberties but to prevent their abuse and protect the most basic liberty of all: freedom from terror. New extradition laws will be introduced; new rules to ensure asylum is not a front for terrorist entry."

Secondly, he rubbished the history of his own party and proclaimed the superiority of traditional liberal capitalist economic and social models: "Our economic and social policy today owes as much to the liberal social democratic tradition of Lloyd George, Keynes and Beveridge as to the socialist principles of the 1945 [Labour] government."

Finally, he called for the abandoning of all opposition to his plans to privatise vast areas of the public sector, including education and the National Health Service. "It's not reform that is the enemy of public services. It's the status quo. Part of that reform programme is partnership with the private or voluntary sector... I regard it as being as important for the country as Clause IV's reform was for the Party, and obviously far more important for the lives of the people we serve."

There is little wonder that Blair was praised for his speech by the big-business politicians and media internationally, but it is significant that he could make such explicit warmongering statements, deliver eulogies to the benefits of imperialist Great Power politicking, and attack the very foundations of the Labour Party without meeting so much as a shred of opposition from the assembled delegates.

Writing in the pro-Blair *Guardian,* Hugo Young even boasted, "Conferences of old would have uttered some squeals of protest. The pacifist wing would have had to be overridden. This time it was not heard from. Not a single speech, not even Tony Benn's, opposed military action outright. The leader had not one enemy in the hall."

Speaking of Blair's colleagues, Young went on, "None of them disagrees with him on anything very much. It is one consequence of the way the leftist debate has gone that nobody, least of all in the cabinet, is capable of framing a serious challenge to what the leader has articulated on virtually any subject."

For an enraptured Mr Young, Blair is "the leader"—a term normally associated with the far right and not a liberal newspaper columnist. For his fellow *Guardian* journalist Simon Hoggart, in a more cynical sketch, he is "Field-marshal Blair" rallying his troops "for war—on socialism" and "tearing up half the Labour party's history like a circus strongman with a telephone book." Not only was Blair's speech applauded, but even in his absence, "no ministerial speech has been complete without an encomium to his powers of statesmanship, his rhetorical genius, his sheer guts and determination in the face of the gathering threat."

It is as if the ruling class and its representatives have collectively lost their heads. Blair is a political opportunist of the worst type who is pursuing a course that poses grave dangers to the stability of Central Asia and the Middle East, and threatens the social cohesion of Britain itself. Yet he is being painted in the media as a giant, and his every utterance hailed as the product of profound insight or deeply held convictions. Even the absence of a credible opposition is saluted as testament to his strength.

The opposite is the case, however. Blair is a hero only to a narrow elite that presently dictates the political agenda. But he lacks any popular mandate for declaring war, let alone for his proposed attacks on education and health provisions. The elevation of such an extremely limited man to his present international stature, despite his lack of popular support, is only possible due to the current absence of any political vehicle through which ordinary working people can make their views felt. But in the long run, the inability of official politics to win the backing of wider layers of the population will prove to be the most dangerous situation facing the ruling class.

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