

Britain: Parliamentary debate reveals growing dissent in "war against terrorism"

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The fourth emergency parliamentary debate on the “war against terrorism” on Tuesday revealed the tension and nervousness among sections of the political establishment, concerned at the international and domestic implications of Prime Minister Blair’s commitment to the US-led campaign.

Previous debates have largely served as a platform for Blair to flaunt his newfound status as international statesman par excellence, and for the opposition parties to declare their support for his every decision. This time, however, six Labour MPs had tabled a strongly worded “early day motion” drawing attention to United Nations’ warnings that Afghanistan faced a “humanitarian crisis of ‘stunning proportions’”. Their motion argued, “The grief and suffering of innocent victims in the USA cannot be answered by the bombing and starvation of equally innocent victims in Afghanistan”. Noting that the US bombardment had intensified the refugee crisis, disrupted vital food distribution and “caused substantial civilian deaths and injuries”, the motion called on the British government “to halt the bombing and urge the United States to do likewise”.

Signed by Paul Marsden, Alan Simpson, Robert Marshall-Andrews, Lyn Jones, Tam Dalyell and Alice Mahon, the tabling of such a motion is parliamentary device, which enables backbenchers to record their views on a particular topic, without it being actually debated.

However, such was the government’s sensitivity to even the slightest criticism that Foreign Secretary Jack Straw chose to attack the early day motion in his own address to parliament on the “coalition against terrorism”.

Straw accused the motion’s authors of attempting to appease Osama bin Laden and other international terrorists. Government critics were simply dodging the choice between “appeasement and allowing the Taliban regime to harbour terrorists”, he said.

Tam Dalyell, the longest-serving MP, severely criticised

the government’s response to US terror attacks and demanded to know what its military objectives in Afghanistan were. Government references to carrying out “carefully calibrated reactions” were “cosy self-delusion”, Dalyell said. Dropping bombs from 30,000 feet did not constitute “effective military action” but could only lead to a “massacre of civilians.”

The Scottish MP continued, “Some of us simply do not believe that the atrocities against Manhattan and the Pentagon were in any way honed or finalised in some cave in Afghanistan. The truth is that they were honed and finalised much nearer home—in Western Europe, in Hamburg-Harburg, London and Leicester, and in the United States itself. What is being done to follow up the leads to those who were actually involved in committing the crimes?”

Senior Labour MP Gwyneth Dunwoody warned of the “deep unease in the British population, who know that one does not on the whole deal with terrorism by mass intervention at state level”.

Alex Salmond, leader of the Scottish National Party, said that the US-led coalition was losing the “battle of public opinion” amongst Muslims. Talk of the conflict going on for years was “extremely dangerous” under conditions in which the “humanitarian clock” was ticking, he said. “If a substantial number of people starve to death this winter, it won’t be the Taliban that are held responsible for that particular disaster. While the government certainly has broad support, it is not support that in any way can be taken for granted.”

George Galloway (Labour) responded to Straw’s allegations of appeasement by stating, “the only supporters of the Taliban are in the government’s coalition... which contains the only countries which until a few days ago—and, in one case, until now—maintain diplomatic relations with the Taliban...”

He added, “The American and British governments

invented the Taliban,” whom they had once armed, financed and trained. Bin Laden’s guards had been “trained at what can only be described as a terrorist training camp near Fort William by the Special Air Service of the British Army”, Galloway continued.

Neither the government nor the opposition parties should fool themselves that there was not “great unease about and considerable opposition” to the bombing of Afghanistan, warned Galloway. Nor should they believe “that the support of juntas, potentates and western dependent leaders for their course of action represents opinion in the countries that are under the heel” of the self-same dictatorships. In truth the US and British governments have “assembled in a coalition for ‘enduring freedom’ some of the least free countries in the world.”

Attacking Afghanistan, the poorest country in the world, from B52 bombers was the moral equivalent of placing “Mike Tyson in a ring with a five-year-old child”, he concluded.

Former minister Peter Kilfoyle (Labour) said that whilst it was true that Osama bin Laden was guilty of terrible crimes, no evidence had been presented directly linking him and his network to the September 11 attacks. Responding to Straw’s earlier statement that, if apprehended, bin Laden should be tried before a US court, Kilfoyle questioned whether, on the same criteria, Israeli Prime Minister and indicted war criminal Ariel Sharon would be tried in the Lebanon for ordering the massacres of Palestinian’s in the Shatila and Sabra refugee camps, or if “Cambodia or Chile [could] arraign [former US Secretary of State] Henry Kissinger on charges of international terrorism?”

More troubling, was that it was “no secret” that factions within the US government were seeking to “shape an agenda...dramatically different from that of the British government”, Kilfoyle continued. How did Blair propose to counteract right-wing hawks in the Bush administration like Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, who are seeking to widen the war to include countries like Iraq and Syria? he asked. Galloway had also raised a similar question, warning that should the US decide to extend the war against Afghanistan to other countries, “it will pitch us from what is shaping up to be a disaster into an international catastrophe”.

Clearly many Labour MPs are concerned that Blair has relinquished any control over the conduct of the war to the US. The prime minister believes his pro-war stance will ensure British interests are looked upon more favourably by the US in the future, but others fear he has

effectively signed away any independent British role, with incalculable consequences.

Similar disaffection may have been responsible for preventing the Welsh Assembly agreeing a united declaration on the international coalition against terror earlier this week. A motion presented to a meeting of party leaders last Friday by Labour’s First Minister Rhodri Morgan was rejected by the Conservative Party because it failed to mention the military action against Afghanistan, limiting itself to a condemnation of the September 11 terror attacks. A Conservative spokesman said it was evidence that the Labour Party was not united behind the campaign.

Tuesday’s debate in Westminster led some to suggest that Blair should ease up on his international shuttle diplomacy and spend more time ensuring his domestic coalition held together. Such suggestions have fallen on deaf ears, however. Blair has used the September 11 terror attacks to further remove himself from parliamentary control. He was not present at Tuesday’s debate. Nor was any minister from the Ministry of Defence—the department responsible for “winding up” or replying to the debate—leading Dalyell to protest that MPs were in “danger of talking to thin air”. Questioned on the government’s objectives in the war against Afghanistan, Straw acknowledged that a briefing given to journalists five days previously had still not been placed in the House of Commons’s library for scrutiny by MPs.

None of the questions raised by MPs in the debate received any serious reply from the government benches. Relying on the services of a largely servile media that barely reported the parliamentary proceedings, the government believes it can simply avoid providing any answers.



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