

Britain: Labour MPs oppose bombing--but not war

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Some fourteen Labour MPs have joined forces to launch a “Labour against the Bombing” group in parliament. This brings together a cross-section of the parliamentary Labour Party—from nominally left MPs such as group leader Alan Simpson, Jeremy Corbyn and George Galloway to Tam Dalyell, a veteran critic of past military campaigns, and includes those formerly considered stalwarts of Prime Minister Tony Blair, such as Paul Marsden.

The dissenting MPs are a tiny minority within parliament, where there is overwhelming cross-party support for President Bush’s “war against terrorism.” However, this has not stopped them from being compared with Nazi “appeasers,” or from being condemned for placing the lives of British troops in danger by breaking parliamentary ranks. Those concerned by the US-led war drive should not be blinded to the character of Labour’s new opposition faction by such specious denunciations.

Simpson, Corbyn, Dalyell and Galloway are all members of the “Coalition against the War”, an umbrella group of individuals, trade unions, left parties and pacifist groups. The parliamentary opposition was unable to describe itself as “Labour against the War,” because not all its signatories are against the Afghanistan war as such. Birmingham MP Lynne Jones, for example, a former opponent of the government’s cuts in social security benefits for the disabled, has said she is “not against all action, I want effective action.”

Such concerns are growing as the bombing campaign—originally promised to be “short and sharp”—extends into its third week. There were also calls for a pause in the bombing by various charities and aid agencies, who estimate that up to six million people in Afghanistan are in danger of starvation this winter if food supplies held up due to the air campaign are unable to get through.

The new parliamentary grouping has also signed up to the aid agencies’ calls for a pause. In face of the terrible humanitarian disaster now unfolding inside Afghanistan, the idea that a temporary suspension in the military bombardment in order to feed people—only then to begin bombing them again—constitutes “humanitarianism,” speaks volumes about the current state of what passes for dissent in official politics.

“Labour against the Bombing” is not motivated by principled

opposition to imperialist war, but by tactical disagreements over its conduct. Galloway, a long-standing critic of US and British foreign policy in the Middle East, spelt this out in an article in the *Guardian*, October 20. The attack on Afghanistan, he complained, had “opened the gates to the barbarians”, and a “long dark night” ahead. Other alternatives should have been considered instead, he continued, such as the “judicious waving of carrots to tribal chiefs” so as to cause their “betrayal” of bin Laden. If this was not enough, military action should have been targeted at the “Arab legions in the mountains... not the poor ragged Afghans they’ve colonised”, Galloway argued.

In an earlier parliamentary debate on the “coalition against terrorism”, Galloway complained that Blair had effectively turned over any control of the conduct of the war to the US and President Bush. Decisions over military targets “will be made not in London, in Downing Street, but in the United States. If the US decides to launch an attack on an Arab country or Arab countries, it will pitch us from what is shaping up to be a disaster into an international catastrophe”, Galloway said.

Galloway articulates the sentiments of a section of the British left traditionally hostile to tying the interests of British imperialism too closely to those of the US. More often than not this is expressed by a preference for United Nations involvement, which, it is claimed, is more broadly based, as opposed to the US-dominated NATO. That the UN has endorsed every expression of neo-colonial aggression led by the US over the last decade—from the Gulf War to the latest intervention against Afghanistan—is brushed aside.

But there is also growing unease at the war’s direction from those sections of the political establishment that do not usually share the left’s anti-US stance. Recent commentary in several newspapers indicates concerns that Blair’s fulsome support for the US war drive could undermine British interests within the Middle East and the strategic Caspian Sea region.

With no apparent end to the military offensive in sight, daily reports of civilian Afghan casualties and disagreements between all the major powers over what type of regime should replace the Taliban—let alone whether the various preferred options can ever be assembled—there are concerns as to just how long the so-called “international coalition” against terror can be maintained. And, moreover, what the impact of the US-

led action will be in countries like Pakistan and Iran, and across the Middle East.

The *Independent* newspaper of October 26 editorialised, “After nearly three weeks of bombing in Afghanistan, the lack of progress in the campaign against al-Qa’ida is worrying. We say this not out of impatience, because three weeks is a short time in a campaign of this kind, nor because we oppose the objectives of the US-led coalition, but because of unease about the tactics being used.

“The question is not simply whether there should be a pause in the bombing, but whether, at this point, night after night of bombing furthers those objectives. We cannot know what information is available to military planners deciding on the targets, but we can guess that the damage now being done to the Taliban military infrastructure does not outweigh the damage being done to the US and its allies in the propaganda war by the daily reports of civilian casualties”.

The *Independent* reassured the government that it remained committed to the war’s objectives, but said “The more Afghan civilians suffer... the more squeamish world opinion will become”.

Signs of divisions within the US administration over the war’s military objectives are another cause for anxiety. In the British press, it is widely reported that a section of the American political establishment, grouped around Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, are pressing for an imminent invasion of Iraq and possibly other, as yet unspecified, countries. Some commentators have even speculated that Blair’s frenetic international coalition building is as much to do with trying to ensure these hawks remain in the minority inside the Bush administration, as it is in keeping other nations on line.

With Blair having agreed to place British troops on stand-by for use in Afghanistan, unresolved questions over the military conduct of the war and its overall aims take on an immediate relevance.

On Friday October 26, the *Guardian* newspaper, which has also been a strong supporter of the war, raised these questions directly in its editorial, “A fog of uncertainty—too many questions, not enough answers”. In amongst 15 questions concerning both current military operations in Afghanistan and future plans for the country, the *Guardian* asked bluntly: “Who is really calling the shots? Is it President Bush? Is it the Pentagon, or Dick Cheney, operating from his ‘secure location’? What influence does Mr Blair have on the overall conduct of the war?”

Also writing in the *Guardian*, former editor Peter Preston fretted at the political consequence for Blair of a split in the US establishment. “Already, just off camera, our leaders may see the forces of nemesis beginning to gather. Bipartisanship is always the first casualty in a war without clear resolution. If the Pentagon is split between hawks and [Secretary of State Colin] Powellite doves, then so eventually will be the American body

politic”.

The result would be a disaster for the Prime Minister, Preston warned. Not only could Blair find himself out on a limb in the US, but this could also further his isolation within Europe and at home. “Leaders who lose wars, of course, tend to lose everything”.

It is not merely Blair’s political fate that is a cause for concern. The acquiescence of all the main parties in the US-led war has led some to fear the consequences for the entire body politic if things should go wrong. Significantly such anxieties are now being expressed most forcefully on the political right.

Matthew Parris, writing in the *Times* newspaper on Saturday, railed against the Conservative Party, whose oft repeated concerns for Britain’s national sovereignty—at least as regards the European Union—have been jettisoned in favour of support for the US-led war drive.

In an indignant tirade, Parris complained, “Britain’s whimpering for Uncle Sam’s permission to join his war game” was “humiliating”. When Britain’s Chief of Defence Staff was “publicly mocked” by Rumsfeld for “taking his own counsel” on the likely duration of the war, and was not defended by the Conservative press, Parris had hung his “head in sorrow at the servility of the Right”.

Notwithstanding the government and media efforts to convince all and sundry that Britain’s role was vital in the current attack on Afghanistan, he continued, everyone knows that “the Americans do not need us”. As Britain “is dragged by an unreliable ally who can do without us into a ruinously expensive foreign adventure over whose operation we have almost no control and whose aims remain frighteningly opaque, the failure of the British Centre Right to produce a single voice of parliamentary dissent, let alone any meeting of sceptical minds, is nothing short of a disgrace”.



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