Britain: Blair spurns popular opposition to back US war vs. Iraq

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In the last week Prime Minister Tony Blair has made a series of statements setting out his unconditional support for a military assault on Iraq.

His statements are significant not simply because they toe US line completely—hardly a first for Blair—but because the prime minister has chosen to do so in defiance of public opinion within Britain itself.

Repeated opinion polls have indicated between 65 percent and 80 percent opposition to a pre-emptive war against Iraq, with a significant majority stating that the Bush administration's war plans are dictated by America's own strategic interests, vis-à-vis control of oil supplies, rather than any genuine fear of a military threat emanating from the Baghdad regime.

Within the Labour Party, at least 100 MPs have expressed their opposition to US war mongering, whilst, speaking on the eve of the Trade Unions Congress (TUC) annual conference this week, transport union leader Bill Morris warned that should war commence with Blair's backing, "the political repercussions will divide the Labour Party".

Yet, in the space of just five days the prime minister has committed Britain to participate in a pre-emptive, open ended war against Iraq in defiance of much of the world if necessary, signed up to the US policy of "regime change" and agreed that Britons must be prepared to pay a "blood price" for the transatlantic alliance. And he has done so without any discussion in parliament, let alone within the Labour Party and amongst the public more generally.

Blair's first public pronouncements were made at a press conference in his Sedgefield constituency on September 3. They followed weeks in which the Bush administration, in the person of Vice President Dick Cheney, had declared its intent to launch a unilateral, pre-emptive strike against Iraq.

Amidst fears of the grave implications of such reckless militarism for international stability, as well as concern over who could be next on the US hit list, Cheney's comments provoked a chorus of international condemnation and pleas that Washington win United Nations approval before any military strike.

Whilst framing his remarks so as to appear in the role of "bridge builder", Blair made clear his complete disregard for such concerns. Claiming that Saddam Hussein represented a "real and unique threat" to international security, Blair said he would be producing a dossier outlining details of Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction" within weeks.

The prime minister did not explain why it should take so long to publish "evidence" that, supposedly, is the basis on which military action is being prepared. Nor why, in the absence of such proof, any one should accept his claims, much less sign up to his war drive.

Nor can he, as his press conference made plain that neither Washington nor London have any substantive evidence to back up ridiculous claims that Iraq constitutes a grave danger to the rest of the world. The sole purpose of Blair's dossier is to attempt to justify the war that the Bush administration, with Britain's backing, has already undertaken to wage.

Indeed, Blair stated blithely in Sedgefield that "originally I had the intention that we wouldn't get round to publishing the dossier until we'd actually taken the key decisions", but that "whatever timelines we've been working on as leaders ... it is clear that the debate has moved on".

Whilst this was presented as a significant concession to the critics, Blair's statement is indicative of his entirely cynical approach towards events. We had intended to agree the sentence before the trial got under way, he as much as confessed. Now we may have to change tack.

His admission, however, presages no fundamental change in policy. The prime minister had made clear that all talk of sending arms inspectors into Iraq to verify its actual capabilities was nothing more than window dressing. As if to underscore this, in another unprecedented assertion, the prime minister set out "either the regime starts to function in an entirely different way or the regime has to change. Now that is the choice, very simply."

Pressed on whether this amounted to support for the US goal of a "regime change", Blair falsely claimed, "We haven't got to the decisions yet on precisely how we deal with this", before continuing, "but be under no doubt at all that we do have to deal with it."

His stipulation of just what Iraq must agree to in order to avoid a military strike made clear that only a regime change will do. Weapons inspectors must be able to "go back in unconditionally, any time, any place, anywhere" and be given "unrestricted unconditional access," he said. This policy of "coercive inspections", whereby whatever Iraq does it will get bombed, was spelt out more fully following the meeting between Bush and Blair at Camp David at the weekend.

But Blair did not only put Iraq on borrowed time. He also refused to rule out pre-emptive action against any other country alleged to constitute a threat to global security. And he arrogantly informed his audience that the UN could only expect to have a role, insofar as it did what it was told. Asked if he agreed that military action must be backed by the UN, Blair said "the United Nations has to be a route to deal with this problem, not a way of people avoiding dealing with this problem". It "makes sense" to deal with Iraq through the UN, Blair went on, "but only if it is the way of dealing with it".

As for critics of US policy in Europe, "If Europe want to be taken seriously as people facing up to these issues" then it had better fall into line too, the prime minister said, before dismissing much of the anti-war criticism within Britain as "anti-Americanism" and largely emanating from those who would never agree to a war under any conditions.

Blair's gung-ho approach underscores that whilst much of the world regards the growing schism in international relations caused by America's incendiary diktats with alarm, for the prime minister it is the ideal opportunity to once again prove that Britain alone can be counted on as Washington's most loyal and constant ally. Even Blair's agreement that Britain would be prepared to pay the "blood price" for its solidarity with the US—made for a television documentary to be broadcast following his visit to Camp David—was leaked in advance so as to convince his

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American hosts of his seriousness.

Internationally and domestically, Blair's performance has led to allegations that Britain is nothing more than America's "poodle"—ready to do its master's bidding whenever it is demanded.

Nonetheless, the prime minister's insistence that Britain's role as US ally is in its "national interests" is not without substance. Writing in the *Financial Times* September 6, Philip Stephens argued that Blair is "more attuned than most postwar British leaders to his country's diminished status. Britain is no longer a great power; his job is to ensure it is a pivotal one. That means stroking the transatlantic relationship".

The *Telegraph* concurred that the major lesson from the past 50 years was that whatever Britain did, it must always be in "concert with our principal ally, the United States."

"Suez, the last time that a military operation brought down a British prime minister," the *Telegraph* continued, "demonstrated that against resolute American opposition, unilateral action was impossible in a superpower era. The Falklands demonstrated the converse, that resistance to an aggressor was still feasible with American support."

This had been proven more recently in the Persian Gulf and Kosovo, the paper continued, underscoring that, regardless of public opinion, it is "imperative for him [Blair] to swim against this tide".

As far as Blair is concerned, by hitching a ride on America's neo-colonialist coattails, Britain has the chance to satisfy some of its own imperialist ambitions—and not just in the Middle East.

It is striking that in the last weeks the Bush administration has begun openly attacking President Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe in terms identical to the Blair government's ongoing offensive against his regime. In point of fact, just days before Blair's Sedgefield press conference, US Secretary of State Colin Powell chose the Johannesburg earth summit to underline US support for a regime change within Zimbabwe.

It would be the height of naiveté to assume that this is coincidental. Rather, such a quid pro quo arrangement would help explain why the British press generally have been supportive of Blair's line on the upcoming war with Iraq, with only the *Mirror* tabloid denouncing Blair for supporting "the narrow, xenophobic, belligerent and mindless attitudes of today's White House".

The *Guardian*—which has functioned as the main cheerleader for a new era of supposedly "enlightened" imperialist intervention, also more recently against Zimbabwe—has been far more cautious in staking out its position, urging Blair only to "Speak up for Europe and ask for some restraint".

But Blair's policy faces a growing army of detractors. Writing in the *Times* September 4, Simon Jenkins complained, "Any fool can smash Iraq to bits. Any fool may even topple President Saddam Hussein. But whether that really makes the world a safer place remains moot."

Unlike much of Europe, "Britain's position is to have no position," he went on, a "humiliating" position for a "mature democracy".

Despite Iain Duncan Smith pledging his party's wholehearted backing for war, leading Conservatives have also voiced criticisms, including former foreign secretaries Malcolm Rifkind and Lord Hurd, European commissioner Chris Patten and ex-ministers such as Douglas Hogg and Nicholas Soames. The concerns of the latter, a former defence minister, are indicative also of widespread misgivings within the top echelons of Britain's armed forces who fear the proposed war will destabilise the Middle East, severely damaging Britain's own national interests within the region.

Sir John Moberly, former top civil servant at the Ministry of Defence, has said of a possible strike on Iraq that it "it is not necessary, not prudent, and not right," and Lord Wright of Richmond, former permanent secretary at the Foreign Office at the time of the 1991 Gulf War, has warned, "The implications of an attack against Iraq could be absolutely devastating."

Of more immediate danger for Blair is the sizeable number of opponents within the Labour Party and trade unions. In an unusually sharp comment, former government minister Mo Mowlam wrote in the *Guardian* September 5, "Under cover of the war on terrorism, the war to secure oil supplies" was being waged.

The US was out to establish its control of the oil-rich Middle East, she continued. Threats against Iraq have nothing to do "with the war against terrorism or with morality. Saddam Hussein is obviously an evil man, but when we were selling arms to him to keep the Iranians in check he was the same evil man he is today. He was a pawn then and is a pawn now. In the same way he served western interests then, he is now the distraction for the sleight of hand to protect the west's supply of oil."

"Where does this leave the British government?" she continued. "Are they in on the plan or just part of the smokescreen?"

Mowlam's questioning articulates the concern of a large section of the Labour Party that, for all his posturing, Blair is not in control of the agenda being set out by the US and that in tying his political fortunes to those of Bush, and isolating Britain within Europe, the prime minister is taking a gamble too far.

Gerald Kaufman, a former shadow foreign secretary, spelt out such fears, stating that assault against Iraq could create a "Vietnam-style situation", whilst Alice Mahon warned, "the prime minister is intent on supporting George Bush which is a risky business. The president is more unpopular than ever."

Veteran Labour Party member and former minister, Tony Benn, warned that Blair was "very likely" to lose his job if he took Britain into a war, an opinion shared by Labour's Peter Kilfoyle, who said military action could be "extremely dangerous" for Blair, providing a "catalyst for all sorts of dissatisfactions and discontents" within the Labour Party.

In a letter to the *Guardian*, leaders of nine of Britain's major trade unions came out against war. The letter, signed by leaders of the rail, post, print and transport unions, as well as public sector unions, declared: "We believe that we are representative of public opinion in Britain and internationally in rejecting George W. Bush's push for military action."

Blair has so far rejected demands for a recall of parliament, currently in recess. With some predicting that the prime minister could face the largest revolt on Labour's back benches since he took office in 1997, he has made clear that any parliamentary debate will take place only *after* military requirements have been put in place. Even then, sources have said, the prime minister may refuse to hold a vote.

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