

Britain: Preparations for war underway despite Blair's assurances

Julie Hyland**27 September 2002**

Given his chosen role as America's most faithful ally, Prime Minister Tony Blair has been at pains to present himself to his Labour government colleagues and European allies as a moderating influence—reining in the unilateralist cowboys in the White House in order to focus US military capabilities in a way beneficial to the whole world.

In reply to those who have accused him of being nothing more than Bush's poodle, Blair has always insisted that as yet the UK has not made a decision on whether to join a US attack on Iraq and that such a decision would be made in consultation with the “international community”. In this way the prime minister has tried to ensure his alliance with Bush does not alienate him amongst other European heads of state more critical of a military strike.

An announcement by Britain's Ministry of Defence (MoD) has exposed this charade. On September 26, the MoD revealed that it is standing down thousands of troops who had been made ready to provide cover for a probable national firefighters' strike. The troops are being readied for military operations instead.

The MoD insisted that the move was not connected to possible military action against Iraq, and reiterated that no decision had been made on that issue.

Really? According to the BBC, some 10,000 soldiers had been allocated to man the army's Green Goddess fire engines in the event of some 55,000 firefighters striking over pay. Now the MoD has stood down 3,000 of these for “potential military operations”. Significantly these include the 1st Battalion of the Black Watch, the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, the 1st Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers and the 1st Battalion of the Irish Guards. “They are largely front-line troops from the joint rapid reaction force on red alert for action,” the BBC reports.

The MoD said it was “prudent contingency planning to allow these higher readiness units to continue with military training and give us the flexibility to undertake operations if required”. “We must ensure we are able to respond to any requirement that may be placed on us,” a spokesman added.

The move appears to confirm reports earlier this week that Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon has already agreed with the US that the UK will provide a “significant” military force in the event of war. Hoon also confirmed that Britain was prepared to join the US in going to war against Iraq, even without the backing of the United Nations. A UN Security Council resolution was “not necessarily the only way forward” in forcing Iraq to disarm, Hoon said. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw repeated this assertion when addressing the House of Commons foreign affairs committee.

According to the *Financial Times*, Hoon also hinted that the US/UK would be prepared to use nuclear weapons against Iraq. Saddam Hussein “is in no doubt of the seriousness of a response to his use of weapons of mass destruction,” he said. Last week, former Conservative Prime Minister John Major reported that Hussein had been warned during the 1991 Gulf War that if he used chemical weapons, the alliance would launch a nuclear strike against Baghdad.

There are signs that Blair's efforts to play both sides at once are not well received by Washington. US officials are said to have reacted angrily to claims by British diplomats that the Bush administration is backing off on its policy of an Iraqi “regime change”. The *Times* reported that said Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Britain's ambassador to the United Nations, told the 10 non-permanent members of the Security Council on September 20, that Washington had put “regime change” on ice, unless weapons inspections came to a

grinding halt.

The ambassador had apparently been trying to persuade US officials to avoid references to regime change “because it upsets other members of the UN”, the *Times* reported. America was not prepared to play ball, however. A US official told reporters that the British ambassador’s claims were “absolutely false” and insisted that “regime change” remained official US policy.

A further indication of the tensions generated by Blair’s policy was an interview with Labour Party chairman Charles Clarke in the *Financial Times*. Conscious that Blair’s support for pre-emptive action would be a major bone of contention at next week’s Labour Party conference, Clarke sought to distinguish British foreign policy from that of the US.

For Britain, “the question of Saddam Hussein’s removal arose in the context of dealing with the threat posed by Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and was not a priority in its own right,” Clarke said. He immediately became worried that he may have unintentionally impugned US motives. No doubt conscious of the withering reaction the US has dished out to German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder for his criticism’s of American policy, Clarke “appeared anxious to qualify the significance of his remarks,” the *FT* reported. It was “too glib to say there were differences or there weren’t differences” between US and UK foreign policy, Clarke went on. It is a “change of emphasis”. At this point, Labour’s chairman appeared to go into an incoherent daze. “I’m not saying anything about the Americans, I’m not saying that’s the view. But the view is they’re principally interested in regime change. That’s not my view. There is a view and that’s what it is. I don’t think that’s our view,” he babbled.



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