

Labourites' imperial strategy

Blair defends support for Bush on Iraq war

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4 October 2002

Prime Minister Tony Blair's keynote speech to this year's Labour Party conference was aimed at stifling growing criticism of his government's policy.

Faced with overwhelming public opposition to Britain supporting the United States' planned war against Iraq, and denunciations of Blair for being President Bush's poodle, the prime minister was forced to present his most extensive statement to date on the underlying political and economic considerations shaping his foreign policy.

Blair's essential argument is that he is the most consistent defender of British interests, but he is also a realist. There are several interrelated strands to his pragmatic world-view.

Even more than his Conservative predecessor Margaret Thatcher, Blair prides himself on a recognition of the fundamental impact of globalisation on both foreign and domestic policy. He came to power in 1997 convinced that no aspect of government policy could disregard the dictates of the global markets and major transnational corporations.

Domestically this meant a historic shift by Labour in abandoning its old reformist programme and its social base in the working class, and instead openly articulating the interests of finance capital and relying electorally on a thin layer of the middle class. In his speech he insisted on the correctness of this course by stressing, "Interdependence is obliterating the distinction between foreign and domestic policy... Today, a nation's chances are measured not just by its own efforts but by its place in the world. Influence is power is prosperity."

In closing he emphasised that the realities of globalisation must also shape foreign policy. "Interdependence is the core reality of the modern world," he said. "It is revolutionising our idea of national interest. It is forcing us to locate that interest in the wider international community. It is making solidarity—a great social democratic ideal—our route to practical survival. Partnership is statesmanship for the 21st century."

What does this high-sounding rhetoric about partnership amount to?

With regard to foreign policy, Blair's aim is to do everything necessary to maintain the ability of British finance capital to play the world's markets. He has often stressed that politics must be informed by an understanding of the reality of Britain's historic decline as a world power, but also a recognition that it must remain a world power—albeit of a second order—given its reliance on world trade and investment. In his speech he ridiculed the notion of taking "refuge in the mists of Empire", adding, "it is a delusion that national identity is best preserved in isolation... Now, at the start of the 21st century, is a time for reaching out."

"Reaching out" is what British capital does best. The UK is still the world's fifth largest trading nation, with one in four jobs linked to business overseas, and the world's second largest overseas investor.

Half of all UK trade is with Europe and this has been on a constant upward trend. Nevertheless it is still far more oriented towards exports to non-European Union countries than other continental countries that primarily trade with each other. Half British exports (visibles and

invisibles) are directed outside the EU and the financial relationship with the United States is the most important of all. Britain is the largest overseas investor in the US, which receives 44 percent of UK overseas investment, compared with the European Union's 36 percent. The US also provides 38 percent of UK foreign investment, compared with 46 percent from all EU countries combined.

Preserving British interests translates into one overriding imperative—to reconcile the US and Europe, to make sure that trade and military tensions do not get out of hand. But for Blair this is predicated on acceptance of the unchallenged military supremacy of the US. He began his argument against the opponents of war with Iraq by insisting, "The Cold War is over. The US is the only superpower." In contrast, "Europe is economically powerful but not yet politically coherent."

Blair recognises two dangers: that the US will be encouraged by its position of supremacy to act unilaterally in its own interests and that the European bourgeoisie's strivings for political coherency will take an anti-American direction. This would be disastrous for the interests of British imperialism, hence Blair's strivings to be the prime mediator between the US and Europe. "The world can go in two ways," he said. "Countries can become rivals in power, or partners. Partnership is the antidote to unilateralism... My vision of Britain is not as the 51st state of anywhere, but I believe in this alliance and I will fight long and hard to maintain it."

This is a familiar refrain from Blair's supporters: Britain is not a US poodle, but a restraining influence on the Bush administration. Addressing congress during its debate on Iraq, Chris Bryant MP was particularly anxious to brown-nose Blair for his supposed successes in this regard.

"There is a lot of talk about Tony being Bush's poodle, but I wonder who is wearing the dog collar. It was Tony who told George to declare in favour of a Palestinian state. It was Tony who forced George to go to the UN only days after his vice president had expressed the opposite sentiment. It's Tony who is insisting the central aim of any war is not regime change, but disarmament."

Mr. Bryant is clearly suffering from delusions of grandeur-by-proxy. His inversion of the relationship between Blair and Bush does not hold water. Blair may have secured the occasional tactical concession from Washington in order to soothe the political sensibilities of his European allies, but more often than not he acts as Bush's lawyer insisting on the wisdom of obsequiousness towards the mighty US.

Whether it is on Iraq, National Missile Defence or any other key policy, the White House does what it sees fit and leaves it to Britain to try and smooth things over. Even as Blair spoke on October 2, newspapers reported a furious reaction by human rights groups such as Amnesty International at a compromise negotiated by Britain allowing individual European states to grant American citizens immunity from prosecution by the new International Criminal Court.

Blair often maintains that conflict is simply the product of a misunderstanding—he famously declared that the class struggle was over and that the formation of the Labour Party through a break with the

Liberals was a mistake. He appears to sincerely believe in his ability to spin his way out of any problem with a well-chosen rhetorical flourish.

But the conflict of interests between the US and Europe cannot be overcome so easily. Blair recognises that the European bourgeoisie, however tentatively, is seeking to challenge US hegemony through the EU project. At one point, he asks pointedly, “Europe is to become 25 nations, one Europe for the first time since Charlemagne, but will it be as a union of nation states or as a centralised superstate? It has taken the first steps to a common defence policy, but will it be a friend or a rival to NATO? The answers to these questions are crucial to Britain. They matter to the British economy, our country, our way of life.”

His answer to this challenge is shaped by the decline in the world ranking of Britain’s ruling class since the Second World War confirmed US global hegemony. For the latter half of the 20th century, Britain did everything to recast itself as America’s most loyal ally—sharing a common language, a mutual aversion to the spread of Soviet power and a nuclear capability and electronic surveillance system stamped “Made in America”. This enabled it to avoid another head-on conflict with Washington following the disastrous 1956 Suez Crisis and to stand taller against its major European rivals, Germany and France.

Blair’s heyday was when Clinton was in the White House. He could discuss with a co-thinker who was anxious to preserve friendly relations with Europe and whose political and economic views dovetailed with Labour’s Third Way. He has tried his best to maintain relations with the Bush administration, but cannot continue the old dialogue with a far more bellicose administration. The transatlantic tensions resulting from the resurgence of US militarism and open contempt for what America’s Christian-right views as Europe’s crypto-socialism does not leave Britain with the same room for manoeuvre.

Germany is today the undisputed economic powerhouse of Europe and is making efforts to bring its political and military standing in line with this reality and to assert its independence from the US.

With antiwar sentiment running high amongst the German working class, the question of Iraq became a major issue during last month’s general election. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder won re-election for the Social Democrat-Green coalition largely thanks to his repeated refusal to support US plans to bomb Baghdad.

The Bush administration’s reaction has been swift and hostile. Schroeder is being cast as a pariah. Washington barely acknowledges the SPD government, snubs it on every possible occasion and treats the opposition conservatives of the CDU as its own government in waiting.

Newsday describes what it called an “Anti-American Victory” on September 25, while Jim Hoagland in the *Washington Post* September 26 wrote, “The German election campaign did not change the government in Berlin, but it may yet change the world. Gerhard Schroeder’s flagrant flirtation with German unilateralism and anti-Americanism is reverberating as a major shock for his partners in Washington, Paris, London and elsewhere.”

Since the election Schroeder, fearful of the impact of open hostilities with a far more powerful rival, has made pains to restore friendly relations with Washington. But whatever happens in the short term, several US commentators have concluded that a clash with Germany and possibly all of Europe is inevitable.

Hoagland for example continues, “A reunited Germany was bound to emerge as Europe’s heavyweight, pushing for its own interests and increasingly chafing at having to host on its sovereign soil tens of thousands of American troops. The only question was when. The answer, we discovered in this campaign and balloting, is now.”

Earlier on September 5, William Pfaff wrote in the *International Herald Tribune*, “the structure of the transatlantic relationship has unmistakably changed in a way not easily repaired, even under a new American presidency. The mutual confidence is gone. The latest developments in the

German parliamentary election campaign give a startling demonstration of German-American divergence, unthinkable six months ago... Whatever happens with Iraq, or ‘after Iraq,’ West Europeans and Americans now seem clearly on divergent courses. There is nothing particularly surprising about this. The relationship has become increasingly brittle since the Cold War ended. This was going to happen sooner or later.”

The *Economist* is amongst those in Britain who point to the rise of a new mood of anti-Europeanism within the US political elite. After citing a list of hostile articles and statements by top politicians, it warns, “Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the gulf between Europe and America is a sense that basic values and interests are diverging.”

Of course Blair can still seize the occasion to strut his stuff. In the run up to the Labour Party conference, he issued his dossier on Iraq and that same day had Schroeder flying to London seeking a way to patch things up with Bush. In the long-run, however, there is a contradiction within British policy that cannot be sustained. After all, what use is a bridge when the two great political forces in the world today are pulling apart?

Whereas until now the US has been happy for Britain play the part of its voice in Europe—a safe pair of hands committed to the unfettered market and NATO and a restraining hand on German and French global ambitions—it may in future demand of Blair, “Which side are you on?” Should that happen, Blair’s alliance with Washington may make him a political pariah within Europe and could close the door on his strategic aim of taking a more central place within the EU by finally adopting the euro.

What makes things worse for Blair is that Schroeder was at least able to utilise antiwar demagoguery to counteract his government’s loss of support as a result of its pro-business policies and attacks on social provisions. In contrast Blair, whose attacks on workers’ living standards make Schroeder’s pale by comparison, is intent on taking Britain into a deeply unpopular war at a time when he faces mounting domestic opposition.

Strikes and planned strikes by railway workers, firemen, municipal workers and others are specifically opposed to Labour’s key economic objectives of holding down wages and pushing through further privatisation—so much so that Blair suffered his first conference defeat because of delegates’ refusal to endorse the Private Finance Initiative. On top of this, on a number of key issues, including education policy, he has succeeded in alienating the selfsame “Middle England” he has sought to cultivate as his government’s social base. This haemorrhaging of support can only worsen, given the winds of economic recession blowing across the Atlantic. Iraq has therefore not only become the occasion for a profound shift in relations between the imperialist powers, but for a sea change in class relations that leaves Blair’s government at its most vulnerable.



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