

Britain: Labour conference votes for war

Julie Hyland
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For those wondering just how it is that Prime Minister Tony Blair came to be regarded as something of a colossus in British politics, this week's Labour Party conference provided the answer. Blair's apparent stature can be accounted for by the prostration of his ostensible opponents.

The media had forecast that the prime minister would face the toughest conference of his political career. Most testing would be his commitment to support pre-emptive military action by the US against Iraq. In parliament 53 Labour MPs had voted against the government on the issue, whilst the day before conference began, some 400,000 people had taken to the streets of London to oppose a war.

War would not be the only bone of contention between the leader and his party, however. The government's Private Finance Initiative (PFI) is also deeply unpopular and rightly so. Although billed as a means for extending public services, it amounts to the backdoor privatisation of schools and hospitals. Private finance is used for infrastructure projects, which on completion are then leased to the government for a set period, usually of 30 years, at highly lucrative rates.

Although Labour Party gatherings are carefully stage-managed affairs, there was concern that popular discontent over such issues would find expression on the floor of conference. Europe Minister Peter Hain had cautioned against the leadership becoming "detached" from the rank and file, and that it must be seen to be responsive to some of party members' concerns.

Conference was certainly twitchy. On the opening day, Treasury Minister Paul Boateng was slow hand-clapped and booed as he spoke in defence of PFI. Despite Chancellor Gordon Brown's insistence that Labour must now fully embrace the pro-enterprise culture, delegates inflicted what was Blair's second conference defeat since he became leader by backing a trade union motion for an independent inquiry into the effectiveness of PFI by 67.19 percent to 32.81 percent.

On Iraq, Blair had earlier told the National Executive

Committee that the "eyes of the world's capitals" would be on the conference. To underline support for the prime minister's position, the NEC had prepared a motion for conference backing Blair's support for the United States and leaving open the option of pre-emptive action. Following the defeat on PFI, however, the NEC decided to withdraw its motion and threw its support behind a more vaguely worded, and successful, resolution backing military action as a last resort.

If anyone had believed Blair might show similar tactical restraint, they were mistaken. His 55-minute speech on Tuesday amounted to a polite but firm "get stuffed" to his party, and the country at large.

"We are at a crossroads: Party, government, country," the prime minister intoned, and everyone would just have to get used to swallowing things they didn't necessarily like. "I know the worry over Iraq. People accept Saddam is bad. But they fear it's being done for the wrong motives. They fear us acting alone," Blair said. It was in recognition of these concerns that the US/UK were taking the "United Nations route".

"But here is the hard part," he went on. If that didn't work, the US and UK would go to war alone. "If ... having found the collective will to recognise the danger, we lose our collective will to deal with it, then we will destroy not the authority of America or Britain but of the United Nations itself.

"Sometimes and in particular dealing with a dictator, the only chance of peace is a readiness for war," he said.

The same resolute attitude was required when it came to PFI. "What we did for the Labour Party in the new Clause IV, freeing us from outdated doctrine and practice, we must now do, through reform, for Britain's public services and welfare state," he said. That is, just as under his leadership Labour had accepted the ripping up of its commitment to the principles of social reformism, so he would now lead Britain into accepting the final dismantling of the welfare state and public services. "What started with the renewal of the Labour Party only ends with the renewal of Britain," he threatened.

The press were transfixed. Was the prime minister's complete indifference to public opinion an example of his courage or rank stupidity, they wondered?

"There could hardly have been a more graphic picture of a once-united party heading off in two entirely different directions," the BBC's Nick Assinder reported. Blair had "waved goodbye to a large section of the Labour movement," but "probably the most astonishing thing about the entire event was that no one seemed astonished." The overwhelming feeling "was of resignation," Assinder said.

Not only resignation, but compliance. Like last month's Trades Union Congress, the Labour conference had never really threatened to be much of a struggle. Even before the conference was under way, the unions had agreed to drop calls for a moratorium on PFI, in favour of mealy-mouthed calls for an inquiry. And, again with union backing, conference defeated—by 60 to 40 percent—a motion opposing any war against Iraq, in favour of an equally mealy-mouthed commitment that military action be taken "within the context of UN authority".

The most graphic illustration that this is a party prepared to go along with anything was the fawning adulation accorded to Bill Clinton. The ex-US president was brought to Blackpool to play the acceptable face of American militarism—an affable fellow thinker as opposed to the widely detested Bush. He was also meant to serve as a reminder of Blair's own stature on the world political stage and thus of his independence from his party.

Reporters described scenes of "Clinton-mania" around the conference fringes and at the £10,000-a-head gala dinner he attended, more reminiscent of an Oscar award ceremony than a political meeting.

Clinton's brief was to sell yet another round of colonial aggression against a small, impoverished country so as to justify Blair's own position. His message was twofold. First he reminded his audience that they had had no problems with supporting previous instances of pre-emptive action, such as against Yugoslavia in 1999. Then he urged delegates to set aside any concerns they might have about the right-wing character of the Bush administration and its true motives—concerns he hinted that he shared—to back an attack on Baghdad in the common interest of creating a safer world.

The Labour Party doesn't need asking twice. This is an organisation, after all, that has become accustomed to overturning ideological beliefs and political principles. And Clinton knew just how to woo the party, insinuating that Labour too could be rewarded with a small place in

America's sun providing it did the right thing—i.e., stomp all over a defenceless people. His message sent the assembled delegates into ecstasy.

The *Guardian* could not hide its dismay at conference proceedings. Its October 1 lead editorial complained of "Labour letdown":

"It is hard to know which was the more deplorable: the Labour leadership's stitch-up of yesterday's Blackpool debate on Iraq, in which the chair called one pro-platform speaker after another; or the feebleness of the delegates whose lack of political skill enabled them to do it."

Conference "had an opportunity to issue a clear, focused conditional message to the government yesterday. They completely blew it. They threw away a huge opportunity to speak out for Britain and unite the forces of caution over Iraq. The Labour conference let the country down," the *Guardian* complained.

But there is a world of difference between the Labour Party and the mass of working people. Labour's "modernisation" has left it largely ineffective as a barometer of public opinion and has helped to create a completely distorted sense of reality amongst the political elite.

Blair's speech confirmed this. He sometimes believed politics was really all about making a choice between "pessimism and hope," Blair said, with himself on the side of "hope", naturally.

The remark was intended to mark the prime minister out as a political visionary, and the delegates lapped it up. But to those who do not share a vested interest in the success of his government, Blair's sound bite simply appears myopic.



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