

# Britain: Blair forecasts "dangerous problems" in 2003

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10 January 2003

In his New Year's message Prime Minister Tony Blair said he could not recall a time "when Britain was confronted, simultaneously, by such a range of difficult and, in some cases, dangerous problems."

Besides a possible war against Iraq, Blair said there was also a "mass of intelligence" pointing to the continued threat of terror attacks from Al Qaeda; an escalating conflict between Israel and the Palestinians that "has the potential to wreak havoc well beyond" the Middle East, and "disturbing developments over North Korea's nuclear programme".

The world economy also gave cause for concern, he continued. Global economic growth had slowed in 2002 to its lowest level since the oil price shocks of the 1970s; production in the G7 countries had fallen; world trade was stagnating and share prices had slumped.

All this meant that "for many people the defining characteristic of the modern world is insecurity"—a situation that would not be allayed by the government's intention to press ahead with measures that Blair admitted were deeply unpopular, such as increased university tuition fees and the further privatisation of public services.

Blair's message was met with almost universal disbelief by the media. What was the prime minister playing at by making such a dark and gloomy forecast, they asked? His remarks were trailed under headlines such as, "Happy New Fear", and "We're all doomed".

Some of Blair's most loyal supporters, such as the *Guardian* newspaper, ventured that his downbeat assessment was deliberate. By frankly pointing to very real dangers, they argued, Blair had been able to strike a Churchillian pose, so making clear that his government would rise to the challenge of the hour.

No doubt that is the impression the prime minister had hoped to convey. Aware that internationally and domestically his government faces opposition on a number of fronts, Blair stressed that there would be no u-turn. "My message is this: that though the concerns are real and justified, Britain is well placed to face up to them," he said. His government had made the "right decisions" and would

not shrink from them "regardless of short-term popularity".

A sober far-sighted leader, a man with a plan? Far from it. Blair resembles a driver who, despite being given clear warning of an imminent pile-up ahead, repeats mantra-like "I am not afraid", whilst continuing in the same direction at breakneck speed.

This is not simply the result of Blair's all too apparent political limitations. After all, this begs the question as to why a man with little political experience, who is animated largely by an inflated sense of his own self-importance, was selected as leader. Rather his premiership is a specific manifestation of the parasitic and crisis ridden character of the British bourgeoisie.

Blair's remarks did not come out of the blue. They reflect widely held fears and anxieties within ruling circles and it is these people whom Blair was addressing in his New Year's statement, seeking to reassure them with the promise of firm government.

Instead the prime minister confirmed once again that his is a government that has no perspective for resolving any of the problems it faces.

Blair believes that political wisdom means reconciling oneself to certain realities and working within the framework set by them. This means recognising that Britain's economic and political influence has declined significantly over the last decades. Consequently, Blair insists, Britain can only hope to stave off a further decline and possibly recover some ground by accepting the unchallenged military and economic supremacy of the US. And it must do so, regardless of the immediate repercussions.

This was most apparent in Blair's remarks concerning war against Iraq. Once again the prime minister sought to maintain the facade that a decision for war had yet to be taken. The "choice is Saddam's," he said. If only Iraq would comply with the United Nations, war could be avoided, he claimed.

Blair knows only too well that the US has made its decision, and nothing Iraq does will prevent its plans for a

military occupation of the country and seizure of its oilfields. Even as Blair claimed that no decision had been made, the British Foreign Office was preparing to announce a call-up of military servicemen to join US forces in the Gulf. Some 1,500 military reservists are to be called up immediately and a Royal Navy task force, led by the HMS Ark Royal, is being made ready for the Gulf. The government has chartered 30 shipping vessels to carry armoured vehicles to the region, with reports indicating that the convey could begin its journey next week. Other reports have stated that some 30 National Health Service hospitals have been officially instructed to place wards on standby to receive British casualties from a war with Iraq.

Blair's deceit is made necessary by the fact that the majority of people in Britain oppose a war against Iraq, and are deeply cynical as to the real motives of the US. He is also conscious of the fears expressed, especially in other European countries, that US action will destabilise the entire Middle East, and push an already fragile world economy over the edge—triggering social and political convulsions.

Yet whilst acknowledging the dangers, Blair insists that it is impossible to buck the dictates of the White House.

In his subsequent address to an unprecedented meeting of British ambassadors from across the world earlier this week—prompted in part by concerns that growing anti-war sentiment will destabilise pro-Western regimes in Asia and the Middle East—Blair reiterated that his government would toe the US line. In return, he asked, Washington must be prepared to “listen” to its closest ally, Britain, and the other European powers.

It is not the first time Blair has sought to cast himself as a “bridge builder”, helping to shape a consensus amongst the western powers. In line with this boast, Blair had pledged in his New Year's address to “reach out to the Arab and Muslim world”. Referring to Israel's continuous breaches of United Nations resolutions, he said it was necessary to “push on with the Middle East peace process ... because otherwise we are guilty of the very double standards we are accused of.” To this end, he announced proudly, “the UK will host a conference on Palestinian reform early in the New Year.”

Within days, his plan was in ruins as the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon declared it would bar Palestinian delegates from attending any UK meeting. Israel's foreign minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, threatened Blair that his stance was out of line with that of the US—Israel's main backer—and would get nowhere. Speaking to his British counterpart Jack Straw, Netanyahu said Blair would be wise to adopt Bush's position “that leaders compromised by terror cannot be partners for peace”, rather than “doing the exact opposite”.

The row underscored the impotence of Blair's agenda. Far

from helping overcome global instability, the reckless militarism of the Bush administration is only exacerbating it. Far from establishing shared interests, it is setting into motion a conflict of each against all.

The implications for an already fragile world economy will be catastrophic, but here also the prime minister could only mouth meaningless platitudes. Britain was well placed to weather the storm, he insisted, despite all evidence to the contrary.

With Britain hugely reliant on global trade and investment, the impact of the economic slowdown now affecting the world's major economies is already being felt. The Confederation of British Industry has warned that the UK's manufacturing sector faces its second recession in as many years. And, in its latest *Economic Review*, accountancy firm Deloitte & Touche warned that economic growth will slump, amid plunging house prices and rising unemployment. Some 250,000 workers would lose their jobs in 2003, it said, forecasting a house price collapse by 20 percent. With two-thirds of all house mortgage holders officially classified as poor, this would make millions destitute virtually overnight.

Yet the prime minister had nothing to say as to what measures his government would take to protect people's jobs, pensions and homes, or safeguard public services from the impending storm. Instead he reassured big business and the banks that regardless of the consequences, his government would hold firm to its “framework of economic management” and “opening up public services to greater diversity of supply”—a euphemism for privatisation.

Blair's message reveals a government divorced from the concerns of working people and resting on an ever narrower layer of the super-rich. He clearly believes that a patrician-style address, insisting people must be prepared to swallow yet more bitter medicine, is all that is required. Whatever his concerns over what lies ahead, he has no real conception of the scale of social and political opposition that his policies of war abroad and austerity at home will inevitably provoke.



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