

Britain: The significance of Blair's response to the mass antiwar protest in London

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Consider if you will the political implications of the British government's response to the antiwar protest in London and internationally that took place on February 15.

The two million strong demonstration was the largest ever seen in Britain and was itself part of the largest ever international protest against war; one that was truly global in character and mobilised well in excess of ten million people.

One might assume that any government when faced with such a massive demonstration of opposition to its policies would at least pause to consider its future course of action: Not so Prime Minister Tony Blair's New Labour.

Speaking at his party's Spring conference in Glasgow, on the very morning that marchers were assembling in London, Blair stepped up the pro-war rhetoric—presenting for the first time a regime change in Iraq as government policy and insisting that ridding the world of Saddam Hussein would be an “act of humanity”. He then mounted a cynical attack on the marchers and their priorities, claiming that those opposing war would have “blood on their hands” if they stopped military action.

“There will be no march for the victims of Saddam, no protests about the thousands of children that die needlessly every year under his rule, no righteous anger over the torture chambers which if he is left in power, will be left in being,” he proclaimed sanctimoniously.

“I do not seek unpopularity as a badge of honour. But sometimes it is the price of leadership. And the cost of conviction. But as you watch your TV pictures of the march, ponder this:

“If there are 500,000 on that march, that is still less than the number of people whose deaths Saddam has been responsible for. If there are one million, that is still less than the number of people who died in the wars he started.”

Blair's speech was followed by a succession of ministers and top government spokesmen, who lined up to dismiss the significance of the protest and proclaim that there would be no change in government policy, including Environment Secretary Margaret Beckett, Health Secretary Alan Milburn, and party chairman Dr John Reid.

A government source said of the march in the *Guardian*, “It changes nothing at all. The quicker it is done, the better.” Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, when asked by members of the public whether the peace protests worried the government, replied, “I don't think it is a worry about the lack of support.”

Government attempts to downplay the representative character

of the antiwar protests was also delivered a blow by an opinion poll commissioned by the *Guardian* and published on February 18. The poll confirmed the size of the London antiwar demonstration, after police claimed an attendance of just 750,000. According to respondents, statistically at least one person from 1.25 million households participated in the march. It found that 58 percent of the public were opposed to war against Iraq under any circumstances, a rise of 12 points, while support for the war has slumped to 29 percent. Blair's personal popularity rating has plummeted from a positive net rating of plus six points last May to a negative net rating of minus 20 points.

Once again the government responded by proclaiming its indifference to public opinion. Blair's chief strategist and closest adviser Alastair Campbell dismissed the poll, saying on LBC radio that such surveys “swing around the whole time”.

The hardline statements made following the demonstration by no means prove that the government was not shaken by the extent of opposition to its pro-war stand. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw visibly wobbled, admitting to the BBC, “It was a very, very large demonstration, probably the largest one we've seen in our recent democratic history in London. We have to take account of public opinion.”

When asked if the government could start a war without public backing, Straw said it would be “very difficult indeed in those circumstances.... It's patently more straightforward for governments to take a country to war, to military action, if they've palpably got the whole of the population behind them than if not.”

Blair himself was forced to back down from his initial provocative stance, and is reported to be pleading with Bush to grant the United Nations weapons inspectors three more weeks to back up his later assurances that there is “no rush to war.” He is counting heavily on securing a second United Nations resolution to provide a veneer of legitimacy to the US war drive.

But whatever tactical efforts are made to placate public opposition to war in the next days, the government will not retreat from its present course. For Blair personally to do so would be political suicide. He has hitched his political wagon to Washington's locomotive and to attempt a disengagement now would provoke a furious row with the Bush administration and discredit Blair both at home and internationally.

Moreover Blair's orientation to the United States is the favoured policy of the dominant sections of Britain's ruling elite. Ever since the Suez crisis of 1956, Britain has sought to base its foreign

policy on cultivating the celebrated “special relationship” with its vastly more powerful transatlantic rival. In return for accepting US hegemony, it has enjoyed favourable trade and investment with the US and has used its voice in the White House as a check on the influence of its major European rivals, Germany and France. This did not preclude an orientation towards Europe, which Washington favoured, but required a delicate balancing act in order that Britain did not find itself overwhelmed by the economic and political might of German capital.

Under conditions where the Bush administration is pursuing a ruthless struggle to secure hegemony over the world through its overwhelming military superiority, Blair has argued successfully for a much firmer alliance with Washington, even if this antagonises Germany and France. He rejects any possibility that an alliance of the European powers can stand against the US. He argued this week; “People who want to pull Europe and America apart are playing the most dangerous game of international politics I know.” Instead he offers himself as both a loyal ally of America and a “good European”, who can restrain the Bush administration from pursuing its interests unilaterally, without respect to the interests of others.

Blair’s stance faces no serious political opposition from the other main parties. The Conservatives are if anything more pro-US and are firmly in support of war with Iraq. The Liberal Democrats are opportunistically seeking to benefit from popular opposition to Blair’s warmongering and his right-wing social and economic policies. Party leader Charles Kennedy was one of the featured speakers at the Hyde Park peace rally, but he did not oppose the war. His only caveat is that it should be endorsed by the United Nations and not be an exclusively US initiative and that the European powers should not be left out in the cold.

What remains of the former “left” in the Labour Party and the trade unions is a toothless rump, which has consistently refused to mount a serious challenge to the party leadership. Amongst those Labourites who have endorsed the antiwar movement, a pro-UN stance is again combined with support for an alliance with the major European powers, France and Germany, as a necessary counterweight to US military might. Blair would see many return to the fold if he secures UN backing for war and most of the rest would stay silent once hostilities commence.

More importantly, what does the government’s refusal to countenance a retreat from war reveal about the state of political and social relations in Britain?

The Blair government will not and cannot accede to the democratic will of the people because it does not act in their interests. Rather, it is the political representative of not simply a British, but an international financial oligarchy, whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the broad mass of the population.

The drive towards war is not merely a subjective decision taken by either Bush or Blair. It is rooted in the ongoing efforts of a superrich elite to accrue ever greater and more obscene levels of wealth through the ruthless exploitation of the world’s people and its natural resources. Domestically the oligarchy of multibillionaires at the head of the giant transnational corporations demand of every government, whether it is the Republicans in the US or New Labour in Britain, that they slash public spending, hold

down wages and shift the burden of taxation away from business and onto the backs of the working class.

Internationally, the oligarchy also demands the elimination of any check on its activities. The conquest of Iraq, just as the war against Afghanistan, is aimed at securing the control of the world’s most important resource, oil, for US corporations as opposed to their European rivals—and also for British commercial interests if Blair is suitably rewarded for services rendered.

These policies have already produced an historically unprecedented polarisation of society between rich and poor—a scale of social inequality that cannot be reconciled with any genuine form of democratic accountability of the government to those who are being made to suffer as a result of its policies.

It is this fundamental political and social reality that must dictate the response of all those seeking to oppose the planned slaughter in Iraq.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party intervened as broadly as possible in the antiwar protests of February 15 and 16. We insisted that the argument that a combination of public protest and the intervention of the UN, France and Germany will prevent war serves to disarm workers and young people and subordinate them to the political representatives of European capital.

Opposition to war must instead be conceived of as an integral part of a political struggle against the economic and social system that gives rise to war, that is capitalism. The fight against imperialist militarism and colonialism must be linked with the defence of the jobs, living standards and democratic rights of the broad mass of the world’s people. It must develop as an independent movement of the social force without a vested interests in the system of capitalist exploitation and imperialist conquest, the international working class. Subsequent events have confirmed the prescience of this analysis.



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