

Britain: Blair ignores popular opposition in parliamentary brief for war

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair's February 25 statement to Parliament, given on the eve of a debate on the Labour government's backing for a US-led war against Iraq, was little more than an extended ultimatum. It was intended as a rebuttal to the proposal tabled in the UN Security Council by France, Germany and Russia calling for the weapons inspectors to be given more time.

Blair began by saying he would "briefly recap the history of the Iraqi crisis," but did no such thing. He started with the conclusion of the 1991 Gulf War, thus conveniently avoiding any explanation of the previous history of relations between Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime and Washington.

He followed with unsubstantiated assertions that Iraq had continued to develop and conceal weapons programmes, including chemical and biological capabilities, in defiance of 17 UN resolutions, and declared there was no evidence of any change of heart on Saddam Hussein's part. "At no stage did he cooperate. At no stage did he tell the full truth," Blair said.

He continued, "The intelligence is clear: he continues to believe his WMD [weapons of mass destruction] programme is essential both for internal repression and for external aggression. It is essential to his regional power. Prior to the inspectors coming back in he was engaged in a systematic exercise in concealment of the weapons."

On the contrary. The intelligence that has been brought forward by both Washington and London, meant to prove the UN had been systematically lied to—two British dossiers and Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the Security Council—have been discredited.

Powell's presentation was dismissed by intelligence

analysts and openly questioned by chief weapons inspector Hans Blix. The fate of Britain's intelligence efforts was if anything more ignominious, when it was found that Blair's second Iraq dossier was largely plagiarised from an American PhD thesis.

Blair's lazy, slipshod presentation to Parliament was indicative of a man who feels he should not be answerable to anyone. He could hardly wait to get to the real point of his remarks, which was to demand support for war. On this essential question the paucity of his argument was thrown into the sharpest relief.

His argument boiled down to the claim that Saddam Hussein had not met every condition, to the letter, laid down in Resolution 1441. The pedantic and sophomoric character of his case was all the more grotesque since he was seeking to justify a military onslaught by the world's most powerful imperialist nation on a largely defenceless population—a war, moreover, whose consequences for the Middle East, and the rest of the world, are as ominous as they are momentous.

Blair insisted war was necessary simply because Saddam had failed "to comply fully immediately and unconditionally" with UN Resolution 1441: "Resolution 1441 called for full, unconditional and immediate compliance. Not 10 percent, not 20 percent, not even 50 percent, but 100 percent compliance. Anything less will not do."

He rejected all calls for more time for inspections, indicating that the onset of war was only two or three weeks away. He said dismissively, "I have read the memorandum put forward by France, Germany and Russia," which he summarised as an appeal for the time "necessary 'to search out' the weapons."

Blair rejected this: "At the core of this proposition is the notion that the task of the inspectors is to enter Iraq

to find the weapons.... That is emphatically not the inspectors' job. They are not a detective agency."

This is a remarkable statement. If the function of the UN inspections is not to reveal undisclosed weapons programmes, or to confirm their non-existence as Iraq insists, then what is it?

The inspectors have been in Iraq for only three months, and yet Blair is adamant that calls for even a further three months are impermissible. Why the rush? Iraq's last military operation was in 1991. Hussein's regime has done nothing for 12 years, other than sustain its own rule over a people brought to ruin and starvation as a result of UN sanctions. It is impossible to take seriously claims that Iraq poses an imminent threat to the people of Britain, the US or any other country.

In fact, the proposal for renewed inspections by Washington was never meant to provide anything other than a pretext for a war that had already been decided upon. Iraq was always meant to have been found in breach of Resolution 1441, in time to meet a deadline set by the US military for an invasion. Whatever "last chance" Blair is now offering Iraq will be dictated by this same timeframe. And if the UN doesn't fall into line, Britain will support a unilateral US attack.

To this end Blair finished his presentation with a scarcely veiled threat, posed on behalf of Washington and directed to France, Germany, Russia and any Security Council members considering backing their motion against the American-British-Spanish war resolution: "At stake in Iraq is not just peace or war. It is the authority of the UN."

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Blair's remarks was what was left unsaid. Not once did he even mention the mass protests against war in Britain and internationally. The largest demonstration in British history, involving 2 million people, as well as numerous opinion polls showing overwhelming opposition within the UK to a war against Iraq, were ignored in a speech supposedly setting the tone for a debate in Britain's parliament.

Blair made no attempt to appeal to the mass of the population to support his policy. Instead he addressed his remarks exclusively to those within his own party who were contemplating voting against his government and in support of the Franco-German position. He was speaking on behalf of the dominant sections of

Britain's ruling elite, who consider support for a US-led war to be essential to the strategic interests of British imperialism.

The fact that Blair did not feel obliged to even acknowledge the sentiments of the majority of the British people is indicative of the contempt for democratic principles within the political establishment as a whole. It underscores the reality of a political system that functions directly as the instrument of a financial oligarchy, presiding over a society characterized by ever greater social inequality.



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