

Britain: Blair government called to order by Washington

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United States Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld delivered a damaging and negative appraisal of the situation facing Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, when he told a reporter on March 11 that the US would go it alone if the UK was unable to participate in a war against Iraq.

Rumsfeld had been asked by a reporter, "Support for war is shrinking rapidly in Great Britain. Would the US go to war without Great Britain, and would the role of the British in an initial assault be scaled back?"

He replied that given the extent of opposition to British participation of a US-led war, "what will ultimately be decided is unclear as to their role ... in the event a decision is made to use force."

The reporter was moved to ask, "We would consider going to war without our closest ally then?" To which Rumsfeld responded, "That is an issue that the president will be addressing in the days ahead, one would assume."

Rumsfeld made clear that Britain was far from being indispensable in any military action against Iraq in order to reiterate the Bush administration's determination to go to war no matter what. Having insisted that opposition in the United Nations Security Council from France, Germany, Russia, China and others would not stop a military attack, Washington was placing Britain on notice that Bush would not be made an indirect hostage to Blair's political fortunes either.

Blair has placed far greater importance on securing a second United Nations resolution backing war than the White House, because without it his political future is placed under immediate threat.

The scale of opposition facing Blair amongst working people is massive and has forced the hand of prominent voices within the Labour Party who believe that Britain's interests are threatened by such a close alliance with Washington that ignores Europe.

During an interview with BBC Radio 4's *Westminster Hour* earlier this week, International Development Secretary Clare Short was asked if she would consider resigning if there was no mandate from the UN for war. She replied,

"Absolutely. There's no question about that."

She explained, "I'm afraid that I think the whole atmosphere of the current situation is deeply reckless; reckless for the world, reckless for the undermining of the UN in this disorderly world, which is wider than Iraq—which the whole world needs for the future—reckless with our government, reckless with his own future, position and place in history...."

"My own view is that allowing the world to be so bitterly divided; the division in Europe, the sense of anger and injustice in the Middle East is very, very dangerous. We're undermining the UN, it's a recruiting sergeant for terrorism, there's a risk of a divided world, with a weakened UN and we shouldn't be doing it like this."

Such comments by a cabinet member were seen as a great aid to opposition elements that one dissenter speculated could help boost the number of anti-Blair votes in parliament to 200. This would mean that Blair would be left with no support for his policy within his party outside of those on the government's ministerial payroll.

There is intense speculation as to the extent of dissent at the apex of the party and who else within the cabinet is unhappy. The BBC listed leader of the House of Commons Robin Cook, Environment Minister Michael Meacher and Labour's former general secretary Lord Larry Whitty. A ministerial aide, Andrew Reed, has quit as personal private secretary to the environment secretary, Margaret Beckett, and a further 14 have threatened to resign if Britain attacks Iraq without the authority of the United Nations.

On the backbenches, the 40-strong Campaign Group of left Labour MPs is accusing Blair of "signing up to the reckless ambitions of US militarism" and urging a special party conference to be called in the event of war to consider his position as leader. The long-time leader of the party's dwindling left wing, Tony Benn, said last week that if Blair leads Britain into a war against Iraq, "it will amount to a personal resignation from the Labour party" and may lead to a "a tragic split".

Amongst ordinary members, there are reports that 40,000

have resigned in recent weeks, after party membership has already halved to 150,000 from its 300,000 highpoint when Blair was first elected in 1997. There have also been various moves to deselect MPs who are loyal to Blair on the question of war.

Within the Trades Union Congress, there are a number of left-led unions who support the demand for a special party conference. The right-wing leadership of the TUC is resolutely opposed, but during talks at Blair's official residence at Downing Street general secretary-elect Brendan Barber nevertheless warned, "There will be mayhem if he does this without the UN."

The precariousness of his position has pushed Blair to make frantic efforts to win over undecided voters on the Security Council, and hopefully secure a face-saving majority even in the event of a veto by one or more of the permanent members. To do this, however, Britain began offering concessions that Washington was clearly not prepared to tolerate—particularly when it mooted a March 21 deadline, or possibly as late as March 24, instead of March 17.

Running out of patience with their ally, Rumsfeld decided to fire a shot across Blair's bows to warn him that he would pay a heavy price if he backed down in face of domestic and international opposition.

His manoeuvre had the desired effect, throwing Britain's government into a panic. Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon was on the phone to his US counterpart almost immediately, in order to reassure him that Britain could still be relied on. Rumsfeld responded by making a subsequent statement just hours later that he had "every reason to believe there will be a significant military contribution from the United Kingdom."

Hoon was then interviewed by BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, where he insisted that Britain's position over war in Iraq was clear and that it would play a military role. Rumsfeld, he said, was raising a "theoretical possibility that British forces might not be involved," but, "He said very clearly in his statement that he has every reason to believe that there will be a significant military contribution from the United Kingdom"—a distortion given that Rumsfeld did not make this latter statement until Britain solicited it.

Hoon also said that while a second UN resolution endorsing war was important for the government, it was not essential: "We have always made clear that UN resolution 1441 was a final opportunity for Saddam Hussein."

This initial statement that Britain would not be stopped from supporting the US by a failure to secure a second resolution was swiftly trumped by Blair, who told parliament that he would "hold firm to the course we have set out," insisting "what is at stake here is not whether the US goes it

alone or not. It is whether the international community is prepared to back up the clear instruction it gave Saddam Hussein with the necessary action."

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw stated that a vote on the Security Council must be taken before the end of the week.

Blair was rewarded by supportive statements from the White House, but his position is more exposed than ever. In a sober appraisal, Seamus Milne in the *Guardian* stated that Blair has "been stabbed in the back by the very US administration for whom he has put his own leadership on the line." And if Blair stays true to Washington he will, "find himself at the heart of the political nightmare he has so long hoped to avoid: facing a likely wave of resignations from government, a parliamentary rebellion that might leave him dependent on Tory support, an explosion of mass opposition in the country and the likelihood of a challenge to his position as prime minister. He would also be party to an act of aggression that the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, warned on Monday would be a violation of the UN charter and therefore illegal."

If Blair has anything going for him, it is that the very gravity of his predicament is also helping to expose the tactical rather than principled character of the official opposition to his stand on Iraq. Former Labour Culture Secretary Chris Smith, who drew up the resolution opposing war without a UN mandate, has rallied to Blair's defence in light of the talk of a leadership challenge. "The last thing we need at the moment is discussion and feverish speculation about the leadership of the party and special conferences and so on," he said.

Short, who actually voted with the government in the last debate on war that saw a rebellion by 122 backbench Labour MPs, used her closest political allies to insist that she wanted desperately to keep her ministerial post and to reassure Blair that she *would* support war with the backing of a second UN resolution.



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