Britain: Blair suffers second parliamentary rebellion over war vs. Iraq

The Editorial Board
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Britain's parliament gathered Tuesday, March 18 to debate and vote on the impending war against Iraq. The Labour government again suffered a major rebellion, larger than that which occurred last month. A total of 216 MPs, comprising 139 Labour dissidents, 15 Conservatives and all 53 Liberal Democrats, voted for an amendment opposing war.

The amendment was defeated with the support of the Conservatives, and the government was able to comfortably win its resolution supporting war by 412 to 149 votes, with 52 abstentions. But it was nevertheless another major blow to the credibility of an already embattled government.

Prime Minister Tony Blair presented the 10-hour debate as proof of his government's democratic accountability. Under Britain's archaic constitution, the prime minister alone can decide to go to war, using the Royal Prerogative, so a debate and vote were held out as a major concession.

The decision for war had already been made—some 45,000 British troops having been assembled in the Persian Gulf to join larger US forces in what has been admitted will be a ferocious military onslaught. Even as Parliament debated, British forces were making the closing preparations for invasion.

Blair had made amply clear that he would not retreat from his support for British participation in the US-led war and could do so counting on the support of the Conservatives and those on ministerial salaries in his own party to guarantee him a parliamentary majority. Just for good measure, however, the prime minister told the Commons that he would resign if his will were defied. He "would not be party" to pulling back from war, Blair stated.

Blair alluded to the gravity of the issues involved in the war against Iraq. At stake was the entire future course of British foreign policy, which, he hinted, centred on how to contain or coexist with an expansionist United States determined to assert its global hegemony.

"It will determine the way in which Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the twenty-first century, the development of the United Nations, the relationship between Europe and the United States, the relations within the European Union and the way in which the United States engages with the rest of the world. So it could hardly be more important. It will determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation," he warned.

"If our plea is for America to work with others, to be good as well as powerful allies," he continued, "will our retreat make it multilateralist, or will it not rather be the biggest impulse to unilateralism that we could possibly imagine? What then of the United Nations, and of the future of Iraq and the Middle East peace process, devoid of our influence and stripped of our insistence?"

His words, in fact, summed up the decline and putrefaction of British capitalism. Britain is to participate in the terrorising and murder of thousands of men, women and children so as to ensure its place in the New World Order that is to be organised under US auspices.

Blair's willingness to tie Britain's future so fully to the Bush administration has generated anxiety amongst sections of the establishment.

In the face of condemnation from across much of the world, the US and the UK have assembled a "coalition of the willing" that reads like a Who's Who? of impoverished, mainly Eastern European countries whose ruling elites are for sale to the highest bidder. Blair's critics have pointed out that in doing so, Britain has alienated itself from many of its European allies and encouraged a dangerously unilateralist US to press forward with its world-conquering mission, with no guarantee that the UK will be kept onside afterwards.

Such concerns have already caused the resignation of three Labour ministers—most notably, leader of the Commons, Robin Cook. In his resignation speech one day prior to the debate, the former foreign secretary articulated the concerns of Labour dissidents.

"I cannot support a war without international agreement or domestic support.... Britain is being asked to embark on a war without agreement in any of the international bodies of which we are a leading partner—not NATO, not the European Union and, now, not the Security Council," Cook said.

He continued: "The US can afford to go it alone, but Britain is not a superpower. Our interests are best protected not by unilateral action but by multilateral agreement and a world order governed by rules. Yet tonight the international partnerships most important to us are weakened: the European Union is divided; the Security Council is in stalemate."

Cook dismissed most of the justifications advanced for war and Blair's course of action. He insisted that France was not the sole obstacle to UN endorsement and it was, in fact, Britain and the US who were isolated. He intimated there was no legal basis for the coming war, due to the lack of "multilateral support: by NATO, the European Union." The Persian Gulf War in 1991 had been "supported by every single one of the seven neighbours in the region. France and Germany were our active allies. It is precisely because we have none of that support in this case that it was all the more important to get agreement in the Security Council as the last hope of demonstrating international agreement."

Pointing to one of the grotesque contradictions in the US-British brief for war, he said: "Ironically, it is only because Iraq's military forces are so weak that we can even contemplate its invasion. Some advocates of conflict claim that Saddam's forces are so weak, so demoralized and so badly equipped that the war will be over in a few days. We cannot base our military strategy on the assumption that Saddam is weak and at the same time justify pre-emptive action on the claim that he is a threat."

He went on to dismiss the claims that Iraq possesses significant weapons of mass destruction, saying, "Iraq probably has no weapons of mass destruction in the commonly understood sense of the term—namely a credible device capable of being delivered against a strategic city target."

Alluding to the hijacked presidential election of 2000, Cook delivered a pointed attack on the Bush administration and its war aim of "regime change." He said, "What has come to trouble me most over past weeks is

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the suspicion that if the hanging chads in Florida had gone the other way and Al Gore had been elected, we would not now be about to commit British troops."

Amongst the Labour dissidents, variations of these concerns were expressed time and again in the parliamentary debate. [*See* "Labour MPs animated by concerns over Britain's isolation"] Such anxieties make plain that the Labour "rebels'" opposition to war against Iraq is something less than a muted reflection of public hostility to a military offensive. That would give them too much credit. Rather, their overriding concerns are for the future course of imperialist foreign policy. Despite their differences with Blair, therefore, many insist they will function as a loyal opposition.

The wording of the amendment they proposed was indicative of the tactical and unprincipled nature of this official opposition, stressing "that the case for war against Iraq has not yet been established, especially given the absence of specific United Nations authorization," but hastening to pledge "in the event that hostilities do commence ... total support for the British forces engaged in the Middle East," and expressing the hope "that their tasks will be swiftly concluded with minimal casualties on all sides."

The general tenor of media commentary was that Blair had emerged from the debate bruised but victorious, and the opposition Labour vote had not been as high as some had predicted. But this almost exclusive concentration on numbers misses out that which is politically essential:

It is not only that Blair has started a war with a divided party. He does so against the express wishes of the majority of the population. In consequence, the carefully cultivated myth of New Labour and its "Third Way" as a democratic political alternative to Thatcherism lies in ruins.

When Blair gave his "back me because there is no alternative" speech opening the Commons debate, the loudest cheers came from the Tory benches, whose leader, Ian Duncan Smith, and former leader, William Hague, both spoke in support of Blair. They were joined in this stand by the leader of the Ulster Unionists, David Trimble, and the personal embodiment of Protestant sectarian bigotry, the Reverend Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party. Rupert Murdoch's flagship publication, the *Sun*, gushed that Blair "won his place in history alongside Churchill and Thatcher"—the two best known leaders of British Conservatism.

On top of this domestic political line-up, Blair goes to war as the main ally of the most extreme right-wing regime in American history, and a US president widely perceived of as a moron who stole an election and acts on behalf of a semi-criminal coterie of oil barons and corporate con men.

The other major partners in the 30-strong "coalition of the willing" are represented in Western Europe by media mogul Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which rules in coalition with the political heirs of Benito Mussolini, and the Spanish party of reconstructed Francoist fascists, Jose Marie Aznar's Peoples' Party.

Nothing could more graphically underline the complete and irrevocable transformation of the old reformist Labour Party into a right-wing bourgeois formation of militarists and free-market ideologues—and this will not be lost on the British working class.

A revealing statement made in the immediate aftermath of the parliamentary vote came from the BBC's Andrew Marr, a former radical who now specialises in jaded and cynical political commentary. As long as the opposition remained confined to those shouting outside parliament, Marr said, Blair could go home that night happy. This stupid remark provided an indication of just how far removed the media establishment is from political reality.

The crisis confronting British imperialism is of historic dimensions and is not determined by parliamentary arithmetic. A far less sanguine estimation of Blair's difficulties was made the day before the vote by the *Financial Times*, which remains the authoritative voice of big business in Britain. Though generally supportive of the Blair government and war with Iraq, its twin editorials for March 18 warned of the dangers posed both domestically and globally.

One, pointedly entitled, "The Loneliness of Tony Blair," noted that his efforts to secure a second UN resolution "have come to nothing." It continued: "The prime minister is poised to order his forces into battle in Iraq alongside those of the US—without specific United Nations endorsement and in defiance of the majority of public opinion and a substantial portion of his own party."

The editorial expressed concern over whether "the revolt [among Labour MPs] was of such a scale as to sweep away a prime minister who still has much to offer his country."

The other editorial spoke of a "diplomatic fiasco" and added, "[I]t is hard to overestimate the damage that has been done to the fabric of international relationships by this crisis. The Bush administration, moreover, even flanked by Mr. Blair, will find there is no easy glide-path from what has rightly been termed gratuitous unilateralism, back to the sort of multilateralism the US and world need to confront the challenges ahead."

Blair may well take comfort from the unprincipled character of most of his parliamentary opponents. He calculates that the support of the Tories and his ability to browbeat the Liberal Democrats and Labour dissidents will ensure that he is safe from any serious political challenge—at least for the duration of the war. He then hopes that a swift victory over Saddam Hussein will allow him to drape himself in the Union Jack like his idol, Margaret Thatcher, in the aftermath of the Falklands/Malvinas war.

Many of his calculations are drawn from experience. Blair saw Clare Short, his first cabinet criti,c crawl on her belly in order to save her fat ministerial salary and lead the lobby vote for war. Even the ministers who did resign all made a point of praising Blair's leadership and reassuring him that there would be no challenge mounted against him.

Cook, for example, began his Commons address by declaring, "The present prime minister is the most successful leader of the Labour Party in my lifetime. I hope that he will continue to be the leader of our party, and I hope that he will continue to be successful. I have no sympathy with, and I will give no comfort to, those who want to use this crisis to displace him."

After Tuesday's vote, he told CNN's Larry King. "I don't think [Blair's] own standing and status is damaged. There's nobody who can credibly challenge him for leadership of the Labour Party."

This is probably true, but it only means that the massive political disaffection that exists amongst working people can find no viable means of expression through the traditional parliamentary mechanisms.

The same is true of the trade unions, whose leaders have distinguished themselves only by their virtual silence on the most fundamental issue of concern facing their members. Symbolising the refusal of the trade unions to oppose Blair, on the very night of the parliamentary vote the ostensibly "left" leadership of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) called off a planned 24-hour strike in pursuit of a 30 percent wage rise. They then recommended acceptance of a scarcely altered 16 percent offer over three years, together with significant cuts in manning—a proposal that has twice been rejected by firefighters. With this action, FBU General Secretary Andy Gilchrist was pledging industrial peace at home so that a bloody war could be waged against Iraq.

With no mass political outlet for the anger felt towards Blair's government, the antiwar movement has so far been characterised by its spontaneity and the diversity of views expressed within it. But it has also become the focus of far broader frustration with the pro-business policies of the government and its attacks on living standards and essential social services. Few amongst the millions of working people who do not share Blair's enthusiasm for war would embrace the political aim of the Labour dissenters to form a block with other European imperialist powers against the US, or their ardent wish for Blair's political survival.

To date, the Labour lefts have been able to put themselves forward as the natural leaders of the antiwar movement—and have done so with the

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blessing of the assorted radical groups such as the Socialist Workers Party. But the conditions are now emerging for this to change.

In the next period a political differentiation will take place within the antiwar movement that will see the anti-imperialist kernel it contains bear fruit. The decision to go to war will thus prove to be politically catastrophic for British imperialism, just as Blair's critics fear.

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