Labour MPs animated by concerns over Britain's isolation

Chris Marsden
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In Tuesday night's parliamentary debate, the speeches by Labour MPs opposing the government—encompassing those on the left of the party and previously loyal Blairites—focused on the absence of a second United Nations resolution and its impact on international relations, the legality of the war being prepared and the threat to the domestic standing of the government.

They did not reflect a principled opposition to imperialism or war, or to the capitalist system that breeds them, but rather concerns within the British political establishment over the far-reaching and potentially catastrophic implications for the British ruling elite of Prime Minister Tony Blair's alliance with Washington in an illegal, aggressive and unpopular war. (See "Britain: Blair suffers second parliamentary rebellion over war vs. Iraq").

Peter Kilfoyle, moving the antiwar amendment, said, "My own interpretation is that this act would be illegal, immoral and illogical. The government will tell us that the selected evidence from the Attorney General that has been published has satisfied the government and ought to satisfy the House, but I prefer to take the views of the many eminent jurists who have reached very different conclusions. And yes, I also accept the view set out by Kofi Annan that the international community needed a second resolution. I am satisfied that, without that second resolution, we are getting into extremely dangerous ground and setting extremely dangerous precedents."

John Denham, who resigned from the government as a Home Office minister, said, "[O]ur prime minister has been ill served by those whom he sought to influence. The US administration appear at times to delight in stressing their disdain for international opinion and in asserting their right to determine not only the target but the means and the timetable, their gratuitous actions apparently designed to make a common voice impossible, not least here in Europe. That has made the international coming together that we need impossible to achieve.

"...I believe that the reaction to such a method of working will be as dangerous as the problems that we are trying to solve. It will turn many parts of the world against us, undermine friendly governments, fuel terrorism and those who will join it in the future, and make it more difficult to sustain international action against common problems."

Malcolm Savidge said, "I want partnership, but I have doubts. I am not happy about partnership if it means that the United States takes the decision and the rest of us are expected to follow—that to me is not partnership—or if, as seems to be happening, the Bush administration decide what action should be taken and what should be done immediately, and allow us to supply some of the rhetoric or some of the long-term wish list.

"If we vote for a pre-emptive war against Iraq now, we should ask ourselves what precedent we will be setting, because the hawks have already said that they have plans for other pre-emptive divisive wars."

Tony Worthington said, "Above all, we are being led by an American president who is completely honest about what his administration intend to do with the world. I have recently been reading Bob Woodward's book, *Bush at War*—on his first war in Afghanistan—which is a real love story. Bob Woodward says of Bush: 'His vision clearly includes a radical reordering of the world through pre-emptive and, if necessary, unilateral action.'"

Brian Sedgemore, on the party's left, said, "The scale of [Blair's] misjudgement on this issue is enormous.

"Who would have thought that the actions of a Labour prime minister would have given rise to the biggest demonstration in our history against his own government? Who would have thought that his actions would give rise to the biggest parliamentary backbench rebellion in modern political history? How did he manage to poison the idea of European unity? The attempts to make France the scapegoat for the miserable failure of British diplomacy have demeaned both our foreign secretary—I regret to say that—and our prime minister.

"...Worse than all that, the prime minister shows himself to be oblivious of and careless towards the shrewd moral judgment of the majority of the British people. No, we do not govern by opinion polls and focus groups, but in a modern democracy we need something stronger to hold onto than the slogan, 'My Prime Minister, right or wrong.'

"In this catastrophe the prime minister, a self-avowed admirer of Baroness Thatcher, has ignored the principal lesson of her demise. He should know, as the rest of us do, that when arrogance turns to hubris, comeuppance is never far behind."

John McDonnell of the Socialist Campaign Group of left MPs said: "I do not accept that Rumsfeld, Cheney, Perle and Bush have the right intention for the future of Iraq.

"I believe that war is illegal... Many will perceive war against Iraq as an act of international vigilantism by a superpower state that increasingly appears out of control. We will reap unforeseen and incalculable consequences for the world, our citizens and constituents for generations. People will suffer and die. No matter how few die, it will be too many for me."

Former sports minister Tony Banks said: "What is being proposed will undermine the authority of the United Nations and replace it with Pax Americana... What really worries me, though, is that we in this country are now trapped between a bunch of right-wing religious bigots in the White House and Islamic terrorists in the Middle East."

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