

Britain: Blair's warmongering denounced by MTV audience

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair's campaign for war against Iraq saw him berated by an audience made up of young people on March 6, in a debate broadcast on the music channel MTV.

The hour-long programme—*An MTV Forum With Tony Blair: Is War The Answer?*—saw Blair questioned by an audience of forty 16- to 24-year-olds from 24 countries, including the United States, Britain, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Kuwait, Libya, Norway, Palestine, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Spain, Sudan, Sweden and the Ukraine.

The debate, facilitated by MTV UK and hosted by Trevor Nelson, was held under extraordinary security measures, filmed in Wembley, north London, well away from MTV's Camden headquarters. Reporters covering the event were not told the location, meeting instead at a central London hotel before being bussed out. The audience too would have been carefully vetted.

As part of the forum, a pre-event online survey on whether the MTV Europe audience felt that weapons inspectors need more time attracted over 80,000 responses—the overwhelming majority, 76 percent to 24 percent, saying they did.

Blair began by telling the audience, "I oppose war unless it's the last resort," which failed to convince anyone. While repeating the line that he was confident of securing a second UN resolution, he then admitted that he would go to war come what may. "If there was a veto applied by one of the countries with a veto or by countries that I thought were applying the veto unreasonably, then in those circumstances I would," he said.

Attempting to give the planned invasion some legitimacy, he stressed his supposed humanitarian agenda: "War is not the answer, not in the first place," he said. "Human rights have to be top of the agenda. I oppose war unless it's the last resort." However, Saddam's record of abuse against his own people and the possibility of him

passing weapons on to terrorists meant he had to be removed.

In response to questions, however, Blair conceded there was no imminent danger from Iraq.

Early on in the debate Niklas Ergandt, a 25-year-old from Sweden, called into question Blair's claim of a link between the impending attack upon Iraq and the so-called war against terrorism. "I'm able to produce anthrax in my bathroom," he said. "Why don't you bomb Sweden?"

Dave Gibson, aged 23 from Britain, accused the government of showing disdain towards public opinion and the people of Iraq. He then asked, "Can you not see that by waging war in Iraq now and killing thousands of innocent people, you will not be reducing the threat of terrorist activity in the United Kingdom, in Europe like you say you will? You will only be increasing it. Can you not see that?"

Manuel Zani, an Italian aged 22, questioned the real motives for the war. In a theme picked up by many in the subsequent discussion, he asked: "Mr Blair, I think the purpose of this war is to get control over Iraqi oil. If you don't agree, please provide us with the evidence."

Blair responded by making the extraordinary claim that since Britain was a net producer of oil it had no interest in the oil in Iraq. This was immediately questioned by a girl from Norway who pointed out that her country was the third biggest oil producing country in the world, but she had read that two third's of world oil reserves are in the Middle East and with resources running low by 2010 this was a concern even for Norway.

When Blair insisted again that oil had nothing to do with the conflict, a young girl from France pointed to her country's interests in the region and asked if that may not explain France's reluctance to support the US and Britain. Visibly agitated but keen to take a poke at France, Blair said he was going to put on his diplomatic hat and refused to answer directly—saying only that he believed there were

good reasons for people to oppose war even if he didn't agree with them. When he later conceded that interests in the region could affect France's position, the moderator Trevor Nelson interjected saying, "So oil is relevant then?"

Also at the centre of the audience attacks on Blair's policy was the Middle East conflict. A Palestinian asked if Sharon's pledge to attack the Syrian-backed Islamic group Hezbollah during any conflict with Iraq would not make things worse—also pointing out that Israel has never complied with a UN resolution. The speaker was cut-off by Nelson.

An Israeli then spoke, saying that it was "despicable" to compare the Israeli government with Saddam Hussein and that the Arab-Israeli conflict could not be compared with the war against terrorism. Blair agreed with this, adding his own endorsement of the criminal actions of Ariel Sharon: "I say to people when they criticise Israel that any government would do the same," he said.

In response to Blair's claim that the answer to the problems in the Middle East lay through a negotiated settlement and that the United Nations, Europe and America all had a role to play in this, he was asked if he thought George Bush was a good ambassador for peace in the region.

One student cited a report by the UN that anticipated half a million civilian deaths resulting from the planned attack on Iraq by the US and Britain. After saying he had seen no such report, Blair stammered, "If I thought that we were going to kill half a million people I would not be here. I don't believe the casualties would be anything like that number."

Some respite from the barrage of criticism came from an Iraqi exile who praised the US and British action. Ammar Hassan, a British Iraqi aged 23, issued what he called "a statement to Prime Minister Tony Blair" saying, "I applaud your courage and your leadership because you are the first British Prime Minister to tackle Saddam head on and not hide behind other people and I am hoping that once and for all that Iraqi people will have peace and they will have their dignity and they will have the right to live in a free, democratic state."

But according to press reports, even Hassan (the only supportive voice in the entire programme) was more circumspect after the end of taping—saying he had been impressed with Blair only "to some extent" and that he wanted to make it clear he was against war. Hassan said he still had relatives in Iraq and was concerned for their safety in a conflict.

The response from other participants following the debate was even more negative, with many describing Blair as "cynical" and "unconvincing".

"I don't think this will make a blind bit of difference to people," said Imran Saithna, 24. "I think it might help raise awareness, but that's it. I came in with the opinion that war is not justified even with a second UN resolution and to be honest, I left with exactly the same opinion."

Pakistani-born law student Osman Anwar and Kurdish politics student Ibrahim Dogus told BBC's *Radio 5 Live* that Blair did not convince them also. He had not addressed important issues such as the West's previous support—and arming—of Saddam Hussein's regime.

In the debate Anwar had told Blair it gave "hypocrisy a bad name" to support Hussein against Iran and then later demand he give up weapons.

"I didn't find him too convincing. The answer to my question he gave was that the weapons we had supplied to him had been exaggerated, but it does suggest there is an element of truth in there as well," Anwar said. "But we don't seem to get to the root of the problem here, which is the weapons we supply and the support we give to non-democratic regimes," he added.

"I'm fairly pessimistic. I've heard it all before," said Juan Allos, 23, an Iraqi exile now living in London.

The MTV debate was intended to portray the prime minister as being receptive to public opinion and keen to explain his case for war, but instead only confirmed the popular perception of someone with supreme contempt for the will of the people. In all of his public appearances the one thing that remains consistent is Blair's intention to go to war, irrespective of public opinion.

Moreover, the debate indicates a growing political awareness among young people. It did not take the form of a friendly question and answer session, but an occasion for conflict and confrontation. Each time Blair attempted to answer a question, he was immediately confronted with another from the same person. And in a series of such one-on-one arguments, Blair fared badly.



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