

Britain's parliament votes for war, after one third of MPs register protest

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1 March 2003

On February 26, 199 British members of parliament (MPs) voted for an amendment insisting that the case for war against Iraq had not yet been made. The measure was put forward in opposition to a resolution backing the war policy of Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The dissident vote marked the largest backbench rebellion in the history of the Labour Party. A total of 121 Labourites, nearly one third of the Labour delegation in Parliament, joined 52 Liberal Democrats, 13 Conservatives and 12 others in the protest vote.

The scale of the dissent was greater than had been generally anticipated, reflecting concern among Labour MPs over massive public opposition to Blair's warmongering, evidenced by the two-million-strong February 15 demonstration in London, as well as opinion polls that show overwhelming opposition to a war against Iraq and plummeting support for Blair.

Notwithstanding the size of the defection among Labour MPs, the protest in Parliament was pale and ineffectual in comparison to the ferocity of popular opposition to the government's war policy. It fell well short of blocking Blair from joining the US in launching a war in open defiance of the democratic will of the vast majority of the British people.

Blair still commanded the loyalty of more than two thirds of the Parliamentary Labour Party—256 MPs—despite his growing unpopularity and his having been repeatedly caught out issuing lies and distortions in an attempt to manipulate public opinion. In recent days, government dossiers in support of war have been exposed as plagiarisms and crude fabrications, and Blair has taken to shifting from one argument to another in a desperate attempt to reverse the collapse of popular support for war.

The amendment put forward by dissident MPs registered opposition of a tactical, rather than principled character. What has been dubbed the "not yet" amendment did not oppose war outright, which to some

extent explains its ability to garner cross-party support. As to the Labour rebels, they spanned the party spectrum from left to right and included a majority who indicated they would back a war if it were sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council.

This was underlined in the most graphic manner when 61 of their number scuttled back to the government camp and supported the main resolution put before Parliament after their amendment had failed. Tabled by Blair, this resolution paves the way for war within weeks, mirroring the motion tabled to the UN Security Council by Washington, London and Madrid earlier this week. The swift return to the fold of over half the Labour "rebels" gave Blair a 434-124 majority for his present policy.

There are sharp political differences indicated by the vote for the amendment, but they reflect a dispute within Britain's ruling elite and do not articulate the antiwar sentiment expressed by the broad mass of working people. Perhaps the most articulate presentation of the underlying concerns of elements within the political establishment came from the former Tory chancellor of the exchequer, Kenneth Clarke.

He solidarised himself with the essential thrust of Blair's foreign policy, saying he supported "being America's closest ally in a great diplomatic crisis to gain the maximum possible influence over the exercise of power." He further credited Blair for having gone "to the United Nations and led it towards the path of diplomacy and peaceful coercion."

To this end he supported UN Security Council Resolution 1441, which "plainly paves the way to war, if necessary." But Clarke went on to insist that war had to be a last resort, and could be justified legally only if a material breach in the conditions laid down by Resolution 1441 occurred with respect to weapons of mass destruction. All other justifications, such as the despotic nature of the Iraqi government, alleged links between

Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, and a supposed imminent military threat from Iraq were, Clark declared, an “insult to our intelligence.”

He closed with a warning of the consequences of war: “How many terrorists will we recruit in the greater, long-standing battle against international terrorism? It will be far harder to win. What will we do to the stability of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or Egypt? What sort of leadership will replace that which might be deposed.... The next time a large bomb explodes in a Western city, or an Arab or Muslim regime topples and is replaced by extremists, the government must consider the extent to which the policy contributed to it.”

Overwhelmingly, the supporters of the amendment accept and support the basic imperialist framework of the long-standing attack on Iraq. They aim, however, to pressure Blair to make greater efforts in reining in Washington’s unilateralist impulses, ensure that the interests of the European powers are recognized and limit the damage to US-European relations. Speaking after the debate, one of the architects of the amendment, Blair’s former culture minister Chris Smith, said he hoped the size of the protest would strengthen the prime minister’s hand in his dealings with Washington and give him leverage to insist on the importance of taking the UN route.

In the end, the “yes” vote for the main motion gave Blair the green light for war he needed. He has the support of over two thirds of all MPs and the official backing of the Conservatives. He can safely assume that a second UN resolution will see the Liberal Democrats fall into line. Liberal Democratic party leader Charles Kennedy has already indicated he may back military action, with or without a second UN resolution.

Blair continues to treat all expressions of opposition with contempt. He stayed to listen to just 30 minutes of the six-and-a-half-hour debate, leaving long before the votes were taken. Even before the debate he made clear that he will go to war regardless of the final vote on the Security Council, and insisted that he has the right, as prime minister, to exercise the royal prerogative of personally declaring war.

The government’s indifference to public opinion is amongst the most fundamental features of current political reality, the significance of which must not be underestimated. Blair has gone so far as to proclaim it a matter of principle that his government stands above the will of the people and is answerable to no one other than himself.

His insistence on his personal authority conceals the fact that his government speaks for a financial oligarchy, whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of the working class. The government’s foreign and domestic policy are dictated by the drive of this super-rich elite to exploit the world’s people and resources without hindrance.

Blair’s ability to proceed in defiance of the will of the overwhelming majority is determined by two factors.

First, he faces no coherent or viable opposition from within the official political establishment. Whatever qualms or tactical disagreements may exist, Blair enjoys the backing of the most powerful sections of the British ruling class. Within his own party, there is no prominent figure prepared to mount a challenge to Blair’s leadership.

Second, the absence of an independent and organized working class presence, due to the cowardice and treachery of the trade unions, gives the government room for manoeuvre.

The scale of public opposition to Blair is massive, but as yet inchoate. It will not find effective expression by looking to any of those who registered their protest in the House of Commons. To look for leadership from these political representatives of big business, who hold out the illusion that support for the UN is an alternative to war, would ultimately lead to the demoralization and dissipation of the social opposition to imperialist war.

What is required is the forging of a broad and independent movement that is based on the working class and advances a socialist programme, linking opposition to militarism and neo-colonialism with the defence of jobs, living standards and democratic rights.



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