

Britain: Labour's Cook and Mowlam rally round the flag

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An article by former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, in which he appeared to call for the immediate withdrawal of British troops from Iraq, was greeted with condemnation across the official parties that produced a swift volte-face by the author.

Cook was among 10 members of the Labour government to resign prior to the war's start in protest at the lack of United Nations endorsement for the US-led action. His article appeared in the *Sunday Mirror*, March 30, under the headline "Bring our lads home," with the strap, "Let's send Rumsfeld and his hawks to war instead."

It was a devastating critique of the war's strategy, conduct and long-term implications, in which he complained that he had been assured that it would be a "quick, easy war" that would be "finished long before polling day for the May local elections."

The promised mass surrenders by Iraqi forces had not materialised, he continued.

"Nobody should start a war on the assumption that the enemy's army will co-operate. But that is exactly what President Bush has done." US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has "marched us up this cul-de-sac," Cook went on. And faced with failure, he is now proposing a new tactic—laying siege to Iraqi cities.

"There is no more brutal form of warfare than a siege. People go hungry. The water and power to provide the sinews of a city snap. Children die," Cook wrote. This, coupled with the devastating missile attacks on two market squares, with the loss of more than 80 civilian lives, meant that far from winning hearts and minds, "there will be a long-term legacy of hatred for the West if the Iraqi people continue to suffer from the effects of the war we started."

"I just hope those who expected a quick victory are proved right. I have already had my fill of this bloody and unnecessary war. I want our troops home and I want them home before more of them are killed," he concluded.

Cook's worst fears expressed prior to the start of war have indeed materialised. When he announced his resignation before parliament on March 17, he made clear that he was

not opposed to war against Iraq under all circumstances but that in lining up so fully with the US, Britain had alienated itself from its European partners with damaging long-term consequences.

Having been unable to gain a second UN resolution authorising the war, Cook warned that the Blair government had bound Britain's fate to an uncertain military course run in America's own interests.

"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's concerns were brushed aside by Blair, who insisted that a quick military victory would prove him right and would strengthen British influence with both the US and Europe, as well as in the Middle East.

It is Blair's scenario that has proven false. Within less than a week the claims that grateful Iraqis would cheer the invading troops as their liberators have been exposed as self-delusion, with even the most pro-war journalists reporting widespread popular hostility towards British and American troops.

Faced with a possible military debacle, coalition forces are now targeting the civilian population in an attempt to force them into accepting the military occupation of their country. Cluster bombs hit market places, killing and wounding hundreds. Civilian infrastructure, such as telephone exchanges and utilities, are subject to relentless bombardment, whilst the population of entire towns and cities, such as Basra, are placed under siege.

Such a policy can hardly be squared with the propaganda of a war of liberation. Far from solving the problem of popular hostility, it is only inflaming it still further.

More importantly for Cook, there is no sign that the Bush administration is prepared to pay back its loyal British ally.

In his article he refers to "real differences between Britain and America over how to run post-war Iraq", pointing to the

“dispute over the management of the port of Umm Qasr” as an example. Rather than appoint “local Iraqis” to manage the port, “the US have appointed an American company,” he complained.

Notwithstanding his reference to local Iraqis, Cook is voicing the widespread dissatisfaction amongst British firms that they are being cut out of lucrative oil and rebuilding contracts by Bush’s policy of awarding American contractors. British companies are now lobbying the government to put an end to this, hence Blair’s pressing for UN involvement in post-war Iraq which he hopes will act as a restraining influence on US greed.

But Bush brushed Blair’s pleas for a UN role aside during their joint press conference at Camp David on March 27, and it was an empty-handed prime minister that rushed off to meet UN Secretary General Kofi Annan afterwards.

Cook’s article was meant as friendly advice to the government, appealing for Blair to recognise that his foreign policy objectives were in tatters and to extricate himself from a worsening situation as quickly as possible.

The former foreign secretary was at pains to avoid any direct criticism of Blair, laying blame for the failure of the British government’s policy at the door of the Bush administration alone. UK troops “must have asked each other how British forces ended up exposed by the mistakes of US politicians,” he wrote, as if the vote to support war in Britain’s parliament had never been taken.

Even after his article had appeared, Cook insisted that Blair had his full support as Labour leader despite his differences over Iraq and that he would do nothing to undermine him.

His protestations of loyalty were to no avail. Instead he became a target for the propaganda weapon now being used to insist that all dissenters line up behind an illegal and unpopular war—that having committed British troops to combat, everyone must now rally to the support of “our boys”. To do otherwise, it is claimed, is tantamount to treachery as it threatens to undermine troop morale, strengthen the “enemy” and possibly cause the death of British soldiers.

This argument is false. It is the government and its supporters that are responsible for recklessly endangering the lives of British forces by forcing them to participate in an act of imperialist aggression in defiance of popular opposition. The appeals to “national unity” are intended to cover over this fact. That is why the entire British establishment lined up to condemn Cook’s remarks.

Home Secretary David Blunkett accused him of “capitulation”. “We have to back our troops ... and we have to ask everyone to answer the question: ‘who do you wish to win?’ ”

Conservative Party Defence Secretary Bernard Jenkins said that Cook’s call for withdrawal was “yet another betrayal of the Iraqi people,” while Liberal Democrats leader Charles Kennedy said it was “not realistic at all” to expect a ceasefire or a withdrawal of British troops. “We owe it to our troops to give them every possible moral support under what are extremely dangerous and difficult circumstances,” he said. “We have to prosecute this as best we can. Let us hope that this [Iraqi] regime will recognise international reality and will give up.”

The attack had the desired effect. Within hours Cook issued a mealy-mouthed denial that he was calling for troops to be withdrawn.

“I am not in favour of abandoning the battlefield ... there can be no question of letting Saddam off the hook,” he said.

His demand to “bring our lads home” was, he added, intended to mean they should fight even harder to ensure a “quick victory”, he said.

Cook’s shameless capitulation is not only a matter of personal opportunism. It exposes the perfidious character of Labour’s so-called opponents of the war. Far from expressing popular sentiment, they are motivated solely by concerns for the strategic interests of British capital—hence the ease by which they jump ship when they are accused of threatening these interests.

That working people can place no confidence in any faction of the Labour Party as an alternative to Blair was underscored by statements from former Labour Minister Mo Mowlam writing in the *Mirror*, April 1, under the headline, “I am against this war but to win it we must stop being weak ... and bomb.”

Dropping 8,700 bombs on a poor and defenceless country in just 12 days is not good enough for Mowlam.

The “softly, softly, ‘we don’t want to be nasty to the Iraqi people’” approach was not working, she wrote. “The Iraqis remain unconvinced, and the hatred of the coalition grows across the region,” whilst Britain was losing “respect”.

“My awful conclusion is that we must win this war quickly, and be seen to be brave, powerful and invincible.” That means escalating the bombing, “even if that means the dreadful level of casualties that will go with it.

“We will still be hated, but we will also be held in awe.... Fear and respect is not as good as friendship and understanding but it is better than being despised.”



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