

WSWS/SEP international conference

The Iraq war and the Blair government

17 July 2003

The World Socialist Web Site and Socialist Equality Party held an international conference entitled “Political Lessons of the War on Iraq: the way forward for the international working class” on July 5-6 in Sydney, Australia.

On July 9, the WSWS published a summary account of the conference [See: World Socialist Web Site holds conference on the political lessons of the war on Iraq] and, on July 10-11, the opening report by Nick Beams, member of the WSWS International Editorial Board and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia [See The political economy of American militarism Part 1, Part 2]

The conference resolutions—“End the US-led occupation of Iraq!”, “Australian troops out of Iraq and the Solomon Islands!”, “For the international unity of the working class”, “For the Political Independence of the Working Class”, “War, the social crisis and the assault on democratic rights” and “Support and develop the World Socialist Web Site”—were published on July 14-16.

Below we are publishing greetings to the conference from Julie Hyland from the SEP (Britain). Hyland is a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board and assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain. In the coming days we will publish other greetings by international delegates to the conference.

The World Socialist Web Site has stressed that the war against Iraq marked a decisive change in political relations, both internationally and domestically. I would like to review this question in relation to the situation in Britain.

At end of the war, as it was described, the official political consensus was that Blair was untouchable. Not only had he snubbed his nose at the mass movement in opposition to a US-led attack, but in joining the intervention he had boosted the so-called special relationship between Britain and the US, strengthened the UK's position against its major competitors in Europe—Germany and France—and hence Britain's position on the global arena.

So confident was Blair of this that he lauded it over his critics, sneering before parliament, “They said there would be thousands dead. They said it was my Vietnam. They said that the Middle East would be in flames.”

He spoke too soon. In Iraq casualties are rising remorselessly on both sides, including just last week the first British fatalities since the formal end of the war—the killing of six British soldiers by an outraged population.

The deaths sent shockwaves across Britain. From the very start of the intervention the British establishment and the media had sought to distinguish between its forces and those of the US. Whereas the latter were gung-ho bullies afraid to get out of their humvees, the British were decent chaps helping out the natives until they were able to help themselves. Hell, not only did they patrol in berets they even played football with the locals.

This is rubbish of course. There are at least two investigations into brutality by British soldiers against the Iraqi population, and photographs apparently taken by British soldiers show them engaged in the torture of

their captives.

The press naturally claimed that the soldiers were the victims of pro-Hussein supporters, but that didn't wash as they were killed in the southern Shia area which had been a centre of opposition to the former regime.

The attacks made clear that the Iraqi people make no distinction between British and US forces. Both are regarded as illegal occupying forces and both will be treated accordingly.

Immediately concerns were raised that Britain was being dragged into a quagmire, with no exit strategy in sight. It is now routine to compare the situation in Iraq with that of Northern Ireland where British intervention led to a 30-year protracted and bitterly resisted occupation at the cost of millions of pounds and untold lives.

Whilst civilian resistance mounts in Iraq, at home the claims on which Blair sought to justify intervention are exploding in his face.

The claim of Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction always played a more important role for Blair than Bush. Firstly, because a majority of the population in Britain opposed a preemptive strike and secondly because the legal fraternity had warned the prime minister that he could not openly follow the US goal of regime change as it is illegal under international law and could lay him open to war crimes charges.

So for months the Blair government staked its political neck on building up the Iraqi threat, functioning as a virtual outpost of the Pentagon issuing one so-called intelligence dossier after another detailing Iraq's supposed chemical, biological and nuclear capabilities.

These now live on in infamy. The allegations that Iraq had purchased uranium from Africa, proven to be based on forged documents, were made by the British. Then there was the dossier—now known as the dodgy dossier—that was proven to be heavily plagiarised from a 12-year-old PhD thesis. And as for the assertion that Hussein could launch an attack within 45 minutes, weeks of intensive searches across Iraq have proven that also was a lie.

The prime minister's position has not been helped by the statement of his US allies that WMD was only made an issue for “bureaucratic reasons”. That is not what Blair told the country. And the prime minister, whose mantra seems to consist of repeating endlessly, “Trust me, I'm Tony”, was forced onto the back foot and forced to accept two investigations into the justifications given for the war in order to head off demands for a more punitive inquiry.

Both inquiries are expected to exonerate the government. The Parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee is appointed by the prime minister and meets in private, and the second, the Foreign Affairs Committee, though cross-party and quasi public, is heavily implicated in the decision to commit British troops.

Though intended as a whitewash, however, matters are not under Blair's control. The bitter disagreements and feuds within the British establishment surrounding the vexed issue of foreign policy are seeping out into the open.

Former International Development Secretary Clare Short has said that

Blair hatched a secret plan with Bush last summer to invade Iraq and to this end, “used half truths, exaggerations, reassurances that were not the case”. Lies in other words, though she calls this “honourable deception.”

Blair already faces war crimes charges laid by the Athens Bar Association. In an effort to divert from their criminal actions, the government launched an offensive against the BBC for its reporting of events but has only succeeded in raising the temperature still further. Far from being unassailable the press is speculating for the first time since Blair came to power that he may be forced to quit.

We now have a surreal situation. The prime minister, who is preparing to receive a congressional gold medal in Washington for service rendered, was recently voted in a Channel 4 poll the most hated person in Britain, beating even Thatcher, and by another poll as the person that should be kicked out of the country.

What accounts for this extraordinary state of affairs and just as importantly for the fact that Blair continues to hold on? Events confirm that the war was an expression not of strength but of profound weakness, and that far from resolving these problems it has intensified them still further.

Blair’s commitment to the war came not, as is clear, out of humanitarian concerns but more fundamental geo-political considerations. In the first place he is insistent that nothing can buck the free market and has overseen Labour’s transition into the preferred party of British capital.

Obviously oil and energy supplies are an issue. Besides the fact that some of the world’s leading oil firms are British, it is estimated that within 20 years Britain will have to import almost all its energy requirements—and the key areas of supply are Africa, the Middle East and the former Soviet Republics, which accounts for British intervention into Sierra Leone, Congo, Afghanistan and Iraq (all conducted under Blair who is now responsible for sanctioning more military interventions than any other prime minister).

More broadly, under conditions where Britain is the second largest overseas investor in the world the issue is how to preserve these interests under conditions of growing economic, political and social disequilibrium and escalating competition.

Britain’s aim has been twofold: to ensure US imperialism, freed for the Cold War restraints, didn’t take such a unilateralist course that it would damage British interests. And to prevent the development of a united European policy that would leave Britain out in the cold, by breaking up the French-German alliance that had been motor of European union.

This determined Blair’s policy towards Iraq. It was not without its dissenters, not least sections of the Foreign Office, Intelligence Services and even a narrow layer of the Labour Party who felt compromised by his actions and greatly anxious that British interests were too closely being entwined with those of the US.

The fact that they were unable to prevent this course, however, points to more far-reaching social and political changes within the very structures of British society.

Firstly, these sections of what passes for the liberal bourgeoisie have no independent policy to counterpose to that of Blair. Those who looked to American Democrats as a restraining influence on Bush were quickly confronted with the absence of any such opposition. For a while Secretary of State Colin Powell was fated as a dove. When he revealed his support for the Bush doctrine, it became clear that this was the preferred course of the US bourgeoisie as a whole. Similarly, those who favoured a more European line found their way sealed by the utter cowardice and perfidy of European bourgeoisie, who, whilst making noises of opposition, caved in before US aggression. When Rumsfeld made his speech dividing Europe in its old and new constituencies, and then when the US made clear that should the British parliament vote against war it would proceed regardless, most realised the game was up.

Secondly, whatever their differences the British bourgeoisie gaze upon

the US ruling class—its wealth and utter indifference to social inequality—with envy and awe. It is rather like having an older brother that is both richer and better looking than you, and whom you love and hate at the same time.

So it is with the British ruling class. They have gone very far with their attempts to emulate the US through privatisations, dismantling welfare, lowering wages, and so on. As a result the collective wealth of the top 1,000 Britons amounts to £155.86 billion, much of it based on financial speculation and grossly inflated property prices. To put that in perspective, virtually the whole of the UK, bar London and the southeast, qualifies for European Union aid under its indices of social and economic deprivation. One third of population live in poverty and in just six years consumer debt has doubled to a record high of £800 billion. Cabinet member Peter Hain’s ruminations that the only possibility of easing the burden on low earning families would be to increase the top rate of tax, currently at 40 percent for anyone earning above £35,000 led to a massive furor, with Murdoch’s *Sun* leading demands for his sacking.

Hain hadn’t even made his speech—it was an advance draft—and his proposal, if implemented, would affect just 10 percent of the population and raise an additional £5 billion a year for the treasury. Nevertheless, Blair rushed out of an EU summit to declare, “I have not spent the last 10 years ensuring the Labour Party is in a position of saying we are not raising the top rate of tax in order to do so now.”

It is this enormous polarisation of society that forms the basis for Blair’s ability to traduce democratic norms. By virtue of an archaic constitution, or lack of it, British prime ministers enjoy powers greater than any president, which Blair is taking advantage of.

A draft bill is being prepared to extend the scope of existing anti-terror laws, under which the government would have the power to rush through temporary legislation without parliamentary approval, handing authorities new powers to declare a regional state of emergency.

Furthermore, Blair has centred power in an unelected cabal of personal advisers, most with extensive business links. Even before the election, Blair’s fundraising amongst big business allowed him to establish the largest opposition leader’s office in history, with 20 full-time staff, giving him a power base independent of his own party and the electorate in general. He is not the only one—Chancellor Gordon Brown, John Prescott and others have similar funding arrangements.

Through these means big business is able not simply to influence government policy but to actively direct it. Blair has brought large numbers of unelected, faceless corporate chiefs directly into government, in some cases by granting them peerages. He has created peers at a faster rate than any other prime minister in British history; 206 in the four years to April 2001, compared to just 201 by Thatcher during her 11 years in office.

For example, Sir Malcolm Bates, chairman of insurer Pearl group, was knighted in 1998, made chair of London Regional Transport the following year, playing a key role in the sell-off of the London tube network and awarding one infrastructure contract for it to a consortium including Balfour Beatty—of which he had, in the past, been a director in its parent company BICC.

Or there is Chai Patel, managing director of Westminster Health Care, one of Britain’s largest chains of nursing homes and a leading proponent of greater private sector input into the National Health Service, who serves as chairman of the NHS Bed Use working group, which recommend freeing NHS beds by transferring older patient to private nursing homes.

Or Alec Reed, boss of one of the largest private employment agencies, and a Labour Party donor. It was a subsidiary of his company that won the contract to oversee the government’s Welfare to Work programme.

I could go on.

This same social policy has ensured a largely sycophantic media. As the

government row with the BBC has shown, anyone who steps out of line will be pilloried and isolated. I would add that the government's choice of target is itself a political decision. The BBC has long been the *bête noire* of the Conservative right, partly because they regard its attempts to project an impartial approach as reckless insubordination and also because they consider it one of the last "nationalised" industries that they are desperate to get their hands on. One of the other measures being prepared by the government is a bill that would further deregulate the media in Britain, enabling Rupert Murdoch and others to take an even greater share of the pie.

What is the outcome of this? The Conservatives, emboldened by the Bush administration, are trying to exploit the government's difficulties, and they certainly need all the help they can get. But they don't want a real exposure of the government's lies over Iraq as it would fatally discredit them and their own political line, which is even more right wing and stridently pro-American than Blair's.

As for the Labour Party, it has ceased to exist as a political party in any meaningful sense of the term. In the parliamentary vote on whether an independent inquiry into the government's justifications for war should be convened just 11 Labour MPs voted in favour. Former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook has made clear in his evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry that he will protect the prime minister. As for Clare Short, she has said that she wants an "elegant succession" and her preferred successor—Chancellor Gordon Brown—has no essential policy differences with Blair.

As for Britain's trade unions, although five are led by nominal socialists dubbed the awkward squad by the press, in the Trades Union Congress they barely made a peep of opposition to the war and the occupation. The TUC refused to endorse the February 15 demonstration and committed itself to supporting "our boys". When it appeared the firefighters would be on strike during the war, they brought maximum pressure to bear on the workers to suspend the action and the union leadership to sell it out.

The radical left sank itself into the Stop the War Coalition (STWC), limiting that movement to pacifist protest and promoting illusions in the European bourgeoisie. Hostile to a policy based on the independent mobilisation of the working class, they made clear they would do nothing to challenge the Labour government.

In a statement reprinted in the Stalinist *Morning Star* recently, Andrew Murray, chair of the STWC, referred in veiled terms to those advocating a more aggressive political struggle against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy's policies, as "malicious, ultra-left provocations".

At first glance it would appear Blair has everything stitched up. But the concentration of power within such a narrow layer is a source of ever-greater instability. On the one hand, the concerns amongst the bourgeoisie over the direction of government policy can find no safe outlet or forum for discussion lest it touch off a social and political explosion beyond its control. They find themselves dragged deeper into the mire. Not only in Iraq. In Afghanistan, elections planned for June are likely to be postponed. And now you have the Bush administration turning its sights on Iran, Korea and Syria.

Blair is in control of nothing. According to one report just as the British parliament was preparing to vote on war, the PM's personal adviser Alastair Campbell was on the phone to his US counterpart beseeching him to hold off the "decapitation" squad it was about to send into Iraq ahead of the invasion. "If you could just hold it till we've got this out of the way, [the vote] it would be very helpful," he said.

On that occasion they bought a few hours but this will not always be the case.

At the same time the working class has no means of expressing its interests through the traditional mechanisms. And yet it is expected to pay the price for this revival of British imperialism: through the lives of its sons and daughters sent overseas to fight predatory wars of conquest on

behalf of a ruling class that denies them a decent living at home; through further cutbacks in essential services in order to finance a massive escalation in military spending; and through the abrogation of its democratic rights.

The same situation is repeated in country after country. It is in this context that we should understand this conference and the work of the *World Socialist Web Site* more broadly. Only an independent movement of the international working class, armed with a political understanding of the experiences through which it has passed, can provide the basis for opposing the eruption of imperialist militarism.



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