

Blair's press conference and the crisis of political legitimacy

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British prime minister Tony Blair's July 30 press briefing, the last before his holiday, provided a snapshot of contemporary politics.

That Blair heads a government about to become the longest-serving Labour administration in British history has nothing to do with popular support. His is a government in deep political crisis, disliked and mistrusted by the broad mass of the population.

Events in recent months have revealed that the Blair government repeatedly lied in order to join the US-led attack on Iraq in the face of overwhelming public opposition, including the largest anti-war demonstrations in history. Intelligence information put out by Blair, supposedly detailing Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, has been discredited, opening the government to charges that it deliberately falsified the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's regime to justify its plans for a pre-emptive, illegal war.

Two parliamentary inquiries into the allegations, by the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) and the Intelligence and Security Committee, though exonerating the government, as expected, have done nothing to stem the controversy.

To deflect from the charges against his administration, Blair launched a political attack on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and its journalist Andrew Gilligan for reporting allegations that the government had "sexed up" its September 2002 intelligence dossier to bolster the case for war. Its witch-hunt to "out" the source of the allegations culminated in the death—widely reported as suicide—of a leading government scientist, Dr. David Kelly, whom the BBC later confirmed to be the source for its reports about the September dossier.

Before Kelly's death, Blair had rejected calls for an independent judicial inquiry into the circumstances

surrounding Britain's decision to join the US in the invasion of Iraq. Now Blair has been compelled to accept a judicial inquiry under Lord Hutton to investigate the circumstances surrounding Kelly's death—an inquiry in which he will, in all likelihood, be called as a witness and forced to testify.

Under such circumstances, and with opinion polls reporting that two thirds of the population believe him to be a liar, one might have expected a cautious and humbled appearance by the prime minister on July 30. Instead, Blair was seemingly indifferent to his government's precarious position. Arrogant and flippant in turn, he boasted of the "marvelous achievements" of his government in office and quipped that leading the England cricket team was a "harder job" than leading the country. Asked by a female reporter if he wanted to take her question next, he joked, "I'll take you anytime."

Blair refused to answer any questions on Kelly's death, saying only that it was a matter for the inquiry, and that he had "no regrets" over his role in recent events.

Asked what steps his government would take to rebuild public confidence, Blair turned the question on its head, saying the issue was that "people need to know that what we did in Iraq was right and justified." With complete disregard for the facts, the prime minister insisted, "The intelligence we received is correct," adding that there was "something bizarre about the notion that Saddam never had any weapons of mass destruction." People should just "wait and see" what happens in Iraq, he said.

Despite the loss of public trust, and regardless of whether he was found to have misled the population over Iraq, Blair insisted he would not contemplate resigning. "There is a big job of work still to do, and

my appetite for doing it is undiminished,” he declared.

What accounts for the strange phenomenon of a vastly unpopular government that at the same time appears almost immovable?

It signifies the extent to which, under conditions of growing social polarisation, the normal elements of democratic procedure have been vitiated. Governments and politics are increasingly based on small elites and bureaucracies. Government leaders are largely media creations, propelled into prominence by the media, manipulated by the media and the most powerful corporate interests, and sustained by vast apparatuses of repression.

This situation is by no means unique to Britain. Similar features can be seen to a greater or lesser extent in every country—from the Bush administration in the United States to the Aznar and Berlusconi governments in Spain and Italy.

Not only is a government able to rule without popular support, such support is no longer regarded as important, or even desirable. The very concept of a government requiring a mass constituency is seen as problematic. To the extent that an administration remains subject to public opinion, the reasoning goes, the less competent it is to carry out the dictates of the ruling elite.

Blair felt little need to build public support for his war against Iraq. He went ahead despite mass opposition.

As for the disquiet within his own party, any legitimacy that the Labour Party once had was due to its mass constituency amongst working people, whose interests and aspirations it was seen to be articulating. Such a broad constituency no longer exists. Blair can today rule virtually independently of his own party because Labour exists not so much as a mass party, but rather as another element of the state bureaucracy—and a semi-moribund one at that.

This is why even as his own popular support decreases, Blair feels able to remain in power. So long as he retains the confidence of decisive sections of the ruling elite, Blair is confident he can carry on in the political vacuum left by the collapse of the old mass organizations of the working class. Even if his support falls to just 1 percent of the population, he feels he can continue, providing it is the right 1 percent (i.e., press baron Rupert Murdoch and similar elements within the

corporate elite). Were this constituency to turn against him, however, he would be gone in 24 hours.

But what at first glance appears to be Blair’s strength—the disintegration of any genuine democratic consensus—is at the same time the source of great instability and weakness. To retain the confidence of the ruling elite, the government is obliged to disassociate itself ever more openly from the interests of working people. Ultimately, this serves only to widen the gulf between it and the broad masses, and deepen the crisis of political legitimacy.

Under conditions of a social and political movement in opposition to such regimes, which must inevitably emerge and has already been foreshadowed in the mass protests against the Iraq war, the bankruptcy of the entire governmental edifice will be very rapidly exposed.



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