

Britain: Labour Party conference prostrate before Blair

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This week's conference of the Labour Party underscored its moribund and sclerotic character.

In the days leading up to the conference, the media had speculated that Prime Minister Tony Blair would face a tough time at the hands of his party. Blair was, after all, appearing before conference as a war criminal—a man widely reviled as a lying schemer who defied mass popular opposition and cooked intelligence reports in order to justify an illegal war of aggression against Iraq.

Three inquiries have been held to try and remove the stench that surrounds his government. But despite their limited remit, these have only confirmed the deep divisions within the ruling elite over the war and proved that the government made false statements on Iraq's supposed threat to international peace.

Everyone now knows that Blair hatched a criminal conspiracy with US President George W. Bush to subvert international law in order to pursue their plans for war against an impoverished and defenceless country. A war, moreover, that far from ushering in a new era of democracy has given way to a colonial-style occupation characterised by increasingly brutal confrontations with the Iraqi people. A recent US blueprint for the country makes plain the Bush administration's intent to launch a scorched earth policy of mass privatisations aimed at facilitating a takeover by the major imperialist powers of Iraq's resources.

Blair's policy on Iraq and his domestic agenda are both dictated by the interests and concerns of the major corporations and banks. Consequently poverty and inequality have increased under Labour as the government has sought to take forward the privatisation of health and education. Just one week before the conference, a combination of opposition to war and anger at deteriorating living standards resulted in a historic defeat for Labour in the Brent East by-election, as it was knocked into second place with a 30 percent swing to the

Liberal Democrats. Opinion polls showed that half of the electorate believes Blair should stand down as prime minister.

Against this backdrop, the media concluded, the Labour conference would be up in arms at the prime minister for his discrediting of the party, and Blair would have to appear humble and contrite.

The opposite was the case. Blair gave a taste of what was to come in an interview on the BBC's *Breakfast with Frost* the day before conference opened where he declared arrogantly that he was "proud" to have gone to war against Iraq. Asked what he would have done differently on Iraq with the benefit of hindsight, he replied: "Nothing. I would have done exactly the same."

People, he said, "can attack me as much as they want. I believe we did the right thing. I believe that our British troops performed absolutely heroically there. I do not apologise for Iraq. I am proud of what we have done."

Blair's address to the party conference on September 30 was if anything even more provocative. He ridiculed the attention that had been paid to his difficulties, saying that some had suggested he should "lead the conference in a chorus of 'Always look on the bright side of life'." And, in a deliberate parody of Conservative premier Margaret Thatcher's 1980 pronouncement, "the lady's not for turning", said, "I can only go one way. I've not got a reverse gear".

Blair gave no account of the false intelligence material and plagiarised documents that underpinned his case for war, much less the failure to find weapons of mass destruction. Whilst acknowledging that the war had "divided the international community... divided the party, the country, families, friends," he insisted that he had been right to go to war and demanded a blank cheque from conference to enable him to proceed in the same way again. "Attack my decision but at least understand why I took it and why I would take the same decision

again,” he said.

According to Blair, the reason for the criticisms that had been made of him were not because he had lied and deceived but that people had too high expectations of the government and did not really understand what it was all about.

Things had got so tough, he claimed, because “an abundance of expectation” had surrounded Labour winning office in 1997. But “instead of reigning in the expectation, we gave it free rein”.

Blair spelt out that his recasting the party as “New” Labour, and its consequent identification as the political representative of big business, was never a clever ruse for winning power after which the party would return to its traditional policies of social reformism.

“I’ve been trying to tell you this for 10 years,” he said. “New Labour for me was never a departure from belief. It is my belief.”

His was “not the Government of some hallucination, where no tough decisions have to be taken, the money grows on trees, the Ministers all hold hands and sing Kum-bay-a,” he said.

Listing Labour’s measures over the last seven years he stressed that giving the Bank of England control over monetary policy, privatisation, law and order and, by association, imperialist wars such as those against Iraq were exactly what Labour stood for.

Far from backtracking from these policies as some had demanded, his government would press ahead with them—overturning the right to asylum, toughening up sentencing, introducing identity cards and ensuring his privatisation plans went through.

Blair’s speech was greeted with a seven-minute standing ovation and the media immediately congratulated the prime minister for his courageous defiance in standing up to his party and making plain who was the boss.

Bravery has nothing to do with it. Labour conferences are stitched up affairs that bear no resemblance to the wishes and aspirations of working people. And in this they are true to the character of the Labour Party itself. Having disavowed any connection with the working class, Labour has lost any mass constituency. Under Blair’s leadership party membership has haemorrhaged from 400,000 to just over 200,000 largely apathetic disenchanted souls. And Labour members report that they are finding it increasingly difficult to organise and run election campaigns.

This is of no concern for Blair, however, who is

indifferent to his party and rules virtually independent of it. Whatever decisions conference had arrived at, Blair would simply have ignored them—something he made plain when the government’s plans for privatising health care were defeated.

Blair can behave in this manner because it is not the Labour Party that keeps him in office, but the continued support of the financial oligarchy whose political representative he is. It is the opinion of this narrow elite alone that really count, and to whom Blair was addressing himself during the conference—reassuring them that despite his unpopularity he would not be pushed off his right-wing course.

In this regard, the conference proved that Blair can rely on the support of the trade union bureaucracy, who did their utmost to ensure nothing was done to undermine the prime minister.

It was the trade union bureaucracy who guaranteed that there would be no debate on Iraq throughout the conference, using their block vote to squeeze it off the agenda. They did the same later in the week when they voted that there should not be a vote on Iraq during a foreign affairs debate that lasted barely half-an-hour and was dominated by a handful of speeches of which pro-war speakers were given prominence.

The unions claimed this was necessary to ensure a discussion on such contentious domestic issues as hospital privatisation. In reality, however, like Blair the trades unions had set their face against popular opposition to the war. The Trades Union Congress made a public statement disavowing the mass antiwar protests because some of those participating had made anti-government statements and called for Blair’s resignation. Last month the TUC passed a resolution condemning the war and calling for the withdrawal of British troops. It has not taken long to prove the hypocrisy of this antiwar pose.

It is one thing for Blair and the trade union bureaucracy to impose their diktats on a pliant and sycophantic Labour Party and quite another for them to do so outside the rarified conference arena. Amongst working people, they face a far more substantial battle.



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