

Bush's London visit highlights mass opposition to US and British governments

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The day US President George W. Bush arrived in Britain at the start of his four-day state visit, the *Guardian* newspaper led with a headline declaring, "Protests begin but majority backs Bush visit as support for war surges."

Basing itself on a Mori poll that it had commissioned, the *Guardian* claimed that most Labour voters welcomed Bush's visit, that public opinion in Britain was "overwhelmingly pro-American," and that most believed the US was "generally speaking a force for good, not evil, in the world."

Bush's "popularity" was attributed to "a surge in pro-war sentiment." Bush was not the only beneficiary. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, though still "unpopular," had seen his approval rating improve by 6 points—rising from minus 18 to minus 12.

There can be few occasions in journalistic history when a newspaper has gone to such lengths to put a brave face on a bad situation. The *Guardian* functions as the mouthpiece of the Blair government, and its extremely limited and highly manipulative survey reflects that political fact.

For example, the category "Labour voters" excludes those former Labour Party backers who are no longer prepared to vote for the party out of opposition to Blair's support for the war in Iraq. Thus, almost by definition, this pool of voters includes those least likely to oppose Bush's visit.

Moreover, few of those who oppose the war consider themselves anti-American and would subscribe to emotive language designating the entire country as a force for "evil." The *Guardian*, it should be noted, chimed perfectly with Rupert Murdoch's *Sun*, which on the previous day published an exclusive interview with Bush and an editorial describing the US as a "force for good."

In any event, one opinion poll of some 1,000 people does not constitute the basis for denying the scale of opposition that has been engendered by the state visit. It is only the most transparent effort by the media to engage in damage control on behalf of the British and US governments.

Were the picture presented by the *Guardian* close to the truth, one could hardly explain why the nation's capital has been transformed into what even the *Guardian* describes as "Fortress London." Everything possible is being done to smooth Bush's path through the top echelons of British society. He is the first US president to be granted a state visit, which involves stopping at Buckingham Palace as the guest of the Queen. On Wednesday he addressed a royal function held at Banqueting House.

But such stage-managed events take place behind a police cordon involving a street presence of over 5,000 officers. The massive security operation has cost millions. The customary open carriage ride down The Mall has been cancelled, as have earlier plans for Bush to address Parliament.

Instead of a PR coup to aid Bush's re-election bid next year, the majority of the world's media deemed the state visit to be something of a debacle.

Germany's *Die Zeit* was not alone when it noted, "The US television stations will not just beam into American living rooms publicity shots of the limousine journey and tea with Elizabeth II. They will also have to broadcast the faces of angry demonstrators and a hermetically sealed London and convey to the American people how unloved, even hated, their president is, even in the country of their closest European ally."

Blair has, if anything, been politically damaged by the visit. Significantly, he chose to defend it to an

audience of top-ranking executives at the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) conference on November 17, and even there his remarks had a defensive ring. “This is the right moment for us to stand firm with the United States in defeating terrorism wherever it is.... Now is not the time to waver, now is the time to see it through,” he said.

Hours later the first protests began—kicking off three days of demonstrations and marches, with the largest scheduled for Thursday and expected to draw tens of thousands into the streets of London.

The scale of security surrounding the state visit and the media’s efforts to underplay public hostility highlight the chasm that has developed between official politics and the mass of working people.

This has been a feature of every meeting of political leaders for the past five years. Conferences of the G-8 industrialised countries, the World Trade Organisation and NATO have taken place behind a ring of steel, whilst tens of thousands of protesters gathered on the other side. News coverage of negotiations between the various powers is routinely interspersed with scenes of riot police attacking demonstrators.

The reaction to Bush’s state visit is a distilled expression of this phenomenon, involving as it does the world’s most unpopular leader and his chief international ally and focusing on their greatest crime.

To understand how deeply millions have become alienated from the political superstructure, one needs only consider the very different reception granted to Bush’s predecessor. Bill Clinton was also implacably hostile to Iraq and launched a war in the Balkans, in which Blair again functioned as America’s main ally. But when he visited Britain in 2000, the event was seen as a political coup for Blair that would help him secure the Northern Ireland agreement and improve his own popularity.

Blair cannot be seen to retreat from his pro-US stance under any circumstances, no matter how great the popular opposition to his support for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. His use of Churchillian language to the CBI delegates, rather than any hint of compromise, is what is demanded by Blair’s real constituency—the financial oligarchy that determines political affairs in Washington, London and all the world’s major capitals.

The axis of Blair’s foreign and domestic policy is to

preserve the interests of this oligarchy, even in the face of universal public hostility.

Britain supported the war and shouldered the burden of occupying Iraq, in part, so that British companies could share in the potentially lucrative contracts in oil and reconstruction. Support for Bush allows London to have increased leverage against its European rivals, and offers the possibility of trade relations that could help counter the domination of the continent by Germany and France.

Behind the pomp and pageantry of Bush’s visit, more prosaic discussions are taking place between Blair and key presidential advisers such as National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Treasury Secretary John Snow. Chancellor Gordon Brown shared a CBI appearance with Snow in which he cautioned against any trade war measures by Europe directed against the US, and advocated the creation of a transatlantic free trade area, claiming it could be worth \$100 billion.

Whether any of this bounty is forthcoming is another matter entirely. To date, Washington has been more generous with words of praise for Blair than with deeds. But Britain’s rulers see no alternative to preserving the so-called “special relationship.”

The indifference and hostility of the Blair government towards the democratic and social aspirations of the population is rooted in the ever widening gap between a narrow and privileged elite for which it speaks and the broad masses who at whose expense the rich and the super-rich are extending their personal fortunes.

It is not possible to achieve a popular mandate for policies aimed at securing imperialist domination of the planet and the destruction of the living conditions of the masses at home. Instead, political life takes on the trappings of a dictatorship over the people exercised by a despised governing elite.



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