

Britain: Ruling elite discuss Iraq strategy

Julie Hyland
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As Prime Minister Tony Blair heads for Washington to reaffirm the trans-Atlantic partnership in face of the growing crisis that the US and its British ally face in Iraq, rumblings of discontent follow him.

These have little to do with the murderous reprisals unleashed by US forces against popular uprisings across much of Iraq. On the need to brutally crush such opposition—even whilst acknowledging its resemblance to the Palestinian Intifada—Britain's politicians and media are unanimous. Rather the differences are over how best to protect Britain's interests in the face of such widespread civilian dissent, and how possibly to use Washington's current difficulties to claim the type of influence that the White House has previously denied its ally.

Senator Ted Kennedy's references to a Vietnam-type scenario unfolding in Iraq have caused alarm in official political circles in Britain. Not least because whereas US defeat in Vietnam had no immediate repercussions for Britain—the Wilson Labour government of the time had rejected military involvement—Blair's Labour government has staked its future on an American victory in Iraq.

Indeed the British prime minister, in his usual messianic way, has gone as far as to tie the entire fate of “civilisation” (which for Blair is analogous with international finance capital) in with the outcome of the “historic struggle” in Iraq.

Another spectre from the past also casts its ghostly shadow over the discussion in Britain—the 1920 uprising by Shi'ite Iraqis against British forces. Though the revolt was eventually bloodily suppressed, it set the scene for such bitter opposition to British rule that its troops were forced to pull out some 13 years ahead of schedule.

The current sense of frustration is palpable. With some 8,700 troops currently stationed in southern Iraq, there is growing concern that the outbreak of national resistance in US-controlled areas could spread to British-controlled areas. And this under conditions where, despite Blair's constant evocation of the “special relationship,” Britain has little or no say, let alone control, over events within Iraq.

Even the Conservative Party has begun to raise its fears. A stalwart supporter of the illegal US-led war against Iraq, as

well as Blair's decision to defy public opinion in order to commit British troops to the colonial invasion, twice this week it has sought to challenge Blair's line on Iraq.

First Tory leader Michael Howard complained that Blair was not exerting sufficient influence over the US-led coalition in Iraq.

In an interview, Mr Howard said: “We have been punching above our weight militarily because of the superb way in which our servicemen and servicewomen have performed their duty.

“But I am worried that we are actually punching below our weight politically and diplomatically because we don't have a real say in the policy-making which takes place in Baghdad and the execution of that policy.”

Howard was particularly vexed at the withdrawal of Sir Jeremy Greenstock as Britain's special envoy in Iraq, in favour of David Richmond, a junior diplomat. This had meant that Britain's voice had been “weakened at the very time it should be made stronger,” he said.

A more high-profile figure should be despatched, and this person should also serve as deputy to Paul Bremer, head of the US puppet provisional authority in Baghdad he continued. But the Tory leader was careful not to imply that he was criticising US actions in Iraq, saying it was difficult to make judgments from London about how the US had handled the situation.

According to an April 14 report in the *Telegraph*, Greenstock's return was bound up with growing fissures between US and British officials in Iraq.

The report cited Michael Rubin, who resigned from the Pentagon 10 days ago after returning from his post in the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, claiming that British officials had “little interest” in pursuing America's vision for Iraq, preferring their “own agenda” instead, and were too “soft” in confronting dissent.

Rubin also complained that US officials had been “startled” at British efforts to use their presence in southern Iraq “for a ‘freelance’ fostering of ties with Iran, one of Washington's most implacable enemies.”

“We got a sense that Britons were using the CPA as an outreach to Iran, which was not the Americans' intention,”

he told the *Telegraph*.

Such tensions had spilled over into relations between Bremer and Greenstock, Rubin continued. “Greenstock thought Bremer was naive; Bremer thought Greenstock was pursuing the wrong policies.”

The differing views reflected differing policies, Rubin suggested. “Bremer is following the president’s agenda,” he said. “And, in general, most British diplomats still don’t agree with the president’s agenda.”

Whatever the truth of these accounts, the Conservatives have made clear that coalition forces must see it through to the end.

Howard’s interview was followed the next day by an interview with Tory foreign secretary Michael Ancram, in which he called on the US and Britain to consider postponing the June 30 date for the handover to the so-called Provisional Authority. The deadline should not be treated as “set in stone,” Ancram said. Rather it would be best for officials in Iraq to decide the date for any transfer.

Ancram’s call reflects concern that Bremer’s handpicked stooge regime is completely compromised in the eyes of the Iraqi masses. Therefore the coalition should ensure all resistance is completely quashed before allowing its handpicked puppet administration to have any say in events.

Notwithstanding their differences over precise deadlines and forms of transfer, the British press is united to this end.

The *Telegraph* itself defends events in Iraq as “the cost of freedom.” Those who claim that the current chaos within Iraq proves that war was wrong are “both morally and intellectually dishonest,” it states.

In the type of doublespeak now routinely resorted to by the media, the *Telegraph* portrays the homicidal efforts on the part of the US to beat the Iraqi people into submission, as being “in the interests of a democratic Iraq.” “Now is the moment of maximum pressure, and the coalition must withstand it,” it entreats.

The *Times* agrees. These are “hard times, hard choices,” its leader warned. “The US and British forces need to suppress the revolt swiftly and restore order.

“Any talk of cutting and running will be fatal. The message that needs to come out of Washington this week is that the Americans and British are determined to finish the job.”

The *Times*’ supposedly liberal counter-part, the *Observer*, is if anything even more gung-ho. “Don’t stop now,” its leader April 11 entreated US and British forces, demanding that they defeat the insurgents (or “bandits” as the *Observer* prefers to describe the resistance).

It would be good if the June 30 deadline could be postponed, the *Observer* states, but Bush is unlikely to agree.

Its suggestion, instead, is to press Bush to accept more United Nations involvement in Iraq. “Lakhdar Brahimi, the excellent Algerian Muslim UN special envoy to Iraq, may be the only man who can successfully get the Iraqis to form an effective new government when Bremer leaves,” it speculates.

Intervention by the UN, more effective new governments—none of these are meant as a substitute for US and British occupation, the *Observer* makes clear. Making “Iraq work” may necessitate “more funds and more troops,” it reasons.

Its sister paper, the *Guardian*, concurs. Blair is right to oppose any retreat from Iraq, it states, as this “would destroy the basis for intervention and make absurd any pretence of a moral case” for the war.

It is in order to salvage whatever tattered credentials are still attributed to Blair’s “moral” war, as well as those journalists who sought to provide them in the first instance, that the UN must be brought in. Though the *Guardian* headlines its leader, “Iraq needs the UN”, what it really means is that the US and Britain need the UN.

The *Financial Times* spells this out loud and clear. Speculating on whether at this late “and dire stage,” the UN can still bail out Bush, it makes clear that any role for the organisation would not be at the expense of the US and British presence.

Rather, the real question is whether the UN could still prove crucial in giving “the transition a legitimacy that the US-led coalition cannot confer?”

“If Mr Brahimi can supply the diplomatic skill the US patently lacks in constructing a credible interim government, then the UN can also help by endorsing it in a Security Council resolution. Any government so dependent on US firepower for its existence will be a bit of a sham. But the sham might hold until next year’s elections if enough Iraqis back it.”

To drown the Iraqi people in blood, with or without the camouflage of the UN? Such is the contemptible level of debate within Britain’s ruling circles.



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