Blair pledges his continued loyalty to Bush on Iraq

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Prime Minister Tony Blair has dismissed calls from within his own party to distance himself from President George W. Bush, insisting that it is in "the interests of the world" that the US/UK military forces remain in Iraq.

Interviewed by the *Independent* newspaper on May 14, Blair admitted his "frustration" at the fact that Iraq was dominating the run-up to local authority and European parliamentary elections on June 10. But he reiterated that he would not change course over Iraq. Nothing would be allowed to jeopardise his alliance with the US, he stressed, adding, "I will remain shoulder to shoulder with George Bush."

Even before the publication of the appalling photographs of US troops abusing Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison, Blair's support for the US-led attack on Iraq was expected to hit Labour hard at the ballot box.

All the justifications made by the government for the war—from claims that Iraq had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction that threatened the world to the coalition's "civilising" and "democratising" mission—have been revealed as nothing but barefaced lies. And in recent weeks the widespread national resistance to US and British occupation forces in Iraq, combined with evidence that the Bush administration authorised the systematic torture of innocent civilians in the country's jails, has further exposed Blair's claims that the war was aimed at "freeing" the Iraqi people.

But Blair rejected what he called the "idea that at the time of maximum difficulty you start messing around with your main ally. I am afraid that is not what we are going to do."

"The most important thing is that we work with our coalition partners and sort it out," the prime minister continued, before dismissing claims that he would stand down before the general election due in 2005, as "froth."

His stance was echoed by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, in Washington for discussions with US Secretary of State Colin Powell on the supposed transfer of Iraqi sovereignty due on June 30. Making an obligatory condemnation of the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners, Straw went on to praise US and British forces, claiming that, "it's thanks to our armed forces that Iraq is on the path to being a sovereign and democratic state, and we will achieve it together."

"We have just got to make sure we prevail and succeed," Straw continued. "It is in the interests of the world that we do. The alternative is not one we should contemplate."

His remarks underscore that in the run-up to the transfer of power to Washington's stooge regime, the coalition intends to step up its subjugation of the Iraqi people.

Also writing in the *Independent*, Robin Cook, Britain's former foreign secretary who resigned over the war, revealed that UK troops are on 24 hours notice to be posted to Iraq. Blair has made a deal with Washington to commit some 5,000 more British troops to Iraq, Cook said, to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of Spanish troops by the new Socialist Party government in response to popular antiwar sentiment.

Cook is one of a number of leading British officials who have stepped up their criticisms of Blair's policy in the Middle East over the last weeks, as it has become ever more apparent that the prime minister's claims to act as a check on US unilateralism have no basis in reality.

Concerns over the impact of events in Iraq for the stability of the entire region have been heightened by

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the Bush administration's decision to rip up the so-called "road map," outlining a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and back Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's land-grab on the West Bank.

Last month, 52 former British diplomats took the unprecedented step of publishing an open letter to Blair, condemning his failure to criticise Bush's stance and urging him to make a "fundamental reassessment" of the government's relations with the Republican administration.

Blair rejected their entreaties. In his *Independent* interview, he reiterated his claim that Bush remained committed to the roadmap, and held out the prospect of a quid pro quo arrangement for his support—revealing that there was the "prospect" that the US would back an aid plan for Africa being drawn up for the time next year when Britain assumes chairmanship of the G8.

The prime minister did not elaborate, but it has been obvious for some time because of his government's provocations in Zimbabwe that the UK is anxious to lead efforts to once again open up the African continent for imperialist exploitation.

Such assurances will do little to salve the anxieties of Cook and others. In his own article, Cook spelt out the implications of the fact that the coalition forces are widely recognised as a colonial force of occupation in Iraq. He notes that in its siege of Fallujah, US forces slaughtered more women and children—almost 1,000 according to some figures—than were "massacred at My Lai during the Vietnam war".

The prospect of British troops being sent to Najaf to suppress the Shiite uprising that erupted more than one month ago, under conditions in which coalition forces had lost control of supply routes and could only venture out in armed convoy, meant that "the reality of our position inside Iraq is dire," Cook said.

Moreover, the oil company British Petroleum and others "have abandoned the country, stalling the repair of the oil industry which was expected to pay for the costs of reconstruction."

According to the *Guardian* newspaper, other senior figures within the Labour Party have also urged Blair to spell out an "independent British position on the Middle East." In particular they are beseeching Blair to play up the differences between British and American military operations in Iraq and advocate a "more emollient approach to the Middle East," by emphasising the fact that the European Union has not supported America's decision to impose punitive sanctions against Syria supposedly on security grounds. The prime minister should also position himself closer to Democrat presidential contender John Kerry, they argue.

That none of those making such suggestions are named makes clear their political cowardice. This is not simply a personal failing on their part—although it certainly will not be helped by the fact that virtually all Labour ministers backed the Iraq war in the first instance.

Rather, the demands advanced by Blair's critics as constituting an "independent" position only make clear that they have no viable alternative to the prime minister's course. None propose that Britain break its alliance with the US, much less demand the immediate withdrawal of British troops. Their proposals concern style, not substance, as is made clear by their advocacy of forging closer relations with Kerry, who has made clear that US foreign policy would remain fundamentally unaltered under the Democrats.

Their position was summed up by Phillip Stephens in the *Financial Times.* Stephens has also advised Blair to put some clear water between himself and Bush, in particular by supporting efforts for the United Nations to play more of a role in Iraq.

But writing on May 15, he pondered the "strategic significance of the looming catastrophe in Iraq." And with an air of hopeless frustration, he concluded that whilst many may bemoan US unilaterialism, there was little viable alternative.

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