

Britain: Blair's defence of his record on Iraq given standing ovation

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Following Prime Minister Tony Blair's speech to the Labour Party conference, the press posed the question: Had he done enough to unite the party and heal the divisions within it over the Iraq war?

Most newspapers answered in the affirmative, particularly those on whom Blair relies for support. Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* said that his "mission" to "make peace with his party on Iraq...was largely accomplished." It concluded, "Blair has much to be proud of."

The *Daily Mirror* described his presentation of why "he still believes he was right" on Iraq as "courageous even if we don't agree with him." It concluded, "Labour has delivered many things it promised at the past two elections. With the spirit Tony Blair showed yesterday he can do it again."

The *Guardian* spoke of the prime minister's "long awaited apology on Iraq" being "a rightly well-received milestone in his fragile rehabilitation with his critics."

It continued, "Mr. Blair could have chosen to confront as he so often has in the past. Instead he elected to converse. He could have shown defiance. Instead he offered dialogue."

Not to be outdone, columnist Jonathan Freedland spoke of "brimming certainty" giving way to "painful humility."

As for the trade unions, one leader after another lined up to heap praise on the prime minister's remarks and pledge themselves to fighting for Labour's third term. Derek Simpson of the engineering union Amicus said, "He did the business." Dave Prentis of the public sector union Unison said, "He dealt with the key issues facing the party head-on. In saying he was wrong over weapons of mass destruction he showed he was a strong leader."

The Transport and General Workers Union's Tony Woodley even complained that Blair had "spent far too much time trying to justify the war in Iraq."

No one who witnessed Blair's one-hour diatribe would recognise these descriptions of the event.

Painful humility? Prior to Blair entering the conference hall, the lights dimmed and a filmed backdrop in delicate hues of purple began proclaiming Labour's "successes." The sound system played Fatboy Slim's dramatic opening to "Right here! Right now!" and the assembled delegates began a slow handclap in anticipation of the entrance of the "great leader." Blair's wife Cherie was so ecstatic that she literally hopped from foot to foot. She was not alone. There was an almost religious fervour in the hall. And when Blair finally entered, the crowd went wild.

Blair didn't have to win over his party. He had them on his side

long before he had uttered a single word. As the *Guardian's* sketch writer Simon Hoggart cynically observed, "He was getting a seven-minute standing ovation not for saying anything, not for what he might be about to say, but simply for existing. For being Tony Blair!"

If simply being was not enough, then Blair could have confidently ended his speech after its first paragraph, knowing that he would have an easy ride. For he began by telling his followers, "We are facing the possibility unique in our 100 year history, of governing Britain for a third successive term. Never done it before. Never debated it before. Never imagined it before."

As far as the vast majority of delegates were concerned, nothing else mattered. Blair was promising to deliver them "Four more years!"—the chant that many had made prior to his entrance.

In a speech that lasted an hour, his every utterance met with applause. A lone delegate registered a protest over the Iraq war and was summarily expelled from the hall, as delegates booed and Blair pontificated how the person should be thankful he lived in a democracy and was free to make his views known.

In reality, there was no contrition expressed by Blair on Iraq. The word "sorry" was removed from his speech prior to delivery, and his extensive presentation on the issue focused on justifying his decision to go to war and his intention to continue to make British troops available for the occupation of the country.

Blair's one concession was a half-hearted acknowledgement that his excuse for going to war had been completely discredited. But even here the non-existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was portrayed as a minor detail.

"The evidence about Saddam having actual biological and chemical weapons, as opposed to the capability to develop them, has turned out to be wrong. I acknowledge that and accept it."

Iraq's capability to produce weapons of mass destruction is equivalent to Blair's capacity to tell the truth. It is a theoretical possibility never tried in practice. But even this met with some applause.

Blair continued to insist: "The problem is I can apologise for the information that turned out to be wrong, but I can't, sincerely at least, apologise for removing Saddam. The world is a better place with Saddam in prison, not in power."

He then went on to reiterate every lie he has ever uttered in justification for his criminal war of aggression—with the sole exception of the WMD claim. Above all, the war against Iraq was portrayed as part of an international struggle against terrorism—as

if there were still proof of any connection between Saddam Hussein and the perpetrators of the September 11 atrocities.

Contained within this presentation was a threat of worse to come. In Blair's world view, Iraq was only part of a network of "worldwide global terrorism," with deep roots "in the madrassahs of Pakistan, in the extreme forms of Wahabi doctrine in Saudi Arabia, in the former training camps of Al Qaida in Afghanistan; in the cauldron of Chechnya; in parts of the politics of most countries of the Middle East and many in Asia; in the extremist minority that now in every European city preach hatred of the West and our way of life."

"If you take this view, you believe September 11 changed the world; that Bali, Beslan, Madrid and scores of other atrocities that never make the news are part of the same threat and the only path to take is to confront this terrorism, remove it root and branch and at all costs stop them acquiring the weapons to kill on a massive scale because these terrorists would not hesitate to use them."

In the week leading up to conference, Blair gave a number of interviews in which he amplified on what removing the threat of terrorism "root and branch" may require in the future. When asked directly, he refused to rule out support for a confrontation with Iran alongside his allies in Washington. Yet when Blair proclaimed at conference, his belief that "salvation will not come solely from a gunship," but ultimately only "through progressive politics," he was again greeted with sustained applause.

And if anyone challenged him on his lies? Blair merely replied, "Do I know I'm right? Judgements aren't the same as facts. Instinct is not science. I'm like any other human being, as fallible and as capable of being wrong. I only know what I believe."

Ergo, if Blair believes that war is right, even if he hasn't a shred of evidence to prove an actual threat to the British people, then war it will be.

Iraq was by no means the only subject on which Blair made clear the right-wing agenda he intends to pursue. He also insisted that his government's attacks on the welfare state and privatisation policies would be intensified. His watchwords were "We have to modernise," that "traditional methods of funding" are inadequate and that no challenge can be met "without altering the rest of our welfare state."

He concluded, "With the courage of our convictions, we can win the third term"—and the delegates duly increased his overall standing ovation total by an additional four minutes.

The reception accorded to Blair says more about the Labour Party than it does about the prime minister.

If ever a party got the leadership it deserved, British Labour is that party.

By any normal criteria, Blair would be considered an electoral liability. Since taking office in 1997, Labour's membership has halved to a 70-year low of approximately 200,000. It has recorded some of its worst votes in the urban centres, and even the many middle-class people who put Blair in Number 10 seven years ago have since abandoned the party.

Such is the level of disconnect that Labour is incapable of mounting any real electoral campaign on the ground. The majority of the population opposed the war in Iraq and want British troops to be brought home. Labour's social policies have no popular

support, and it stands in opposition to its traditional constituency on every major issue—be it the National Health Service, education, or public services.

Moreover, the prime minister has been widely shown to be an unmitigated liar, who is prepared to trample on the popular will to pursue his own agenda.

But Blair has the support of big business, and that is all he needs, as far as Labour's apparatus is concerned.

His crimes are those of his party. Blair's reception at conference demonstrated the extent to which Labour is a right-wing rump that has no connection with the working class. It rules on behalf of a financial oligarchy whose interests are diametrically opposed to the mass of the population. It draws its core membership from an aspiring petty bourgeois layer of career politicians, apparatchiks and trade union functionaries who will swallow anything in order further their own privileged existence.

When Blair speaks of 18 years in the political wilderness pre-1997 and offers them the fruits of office for another term, one can almost see the sums being done in the heads of conference delegates. Many have incomes in the top 20 percent of the population, while Blair's immediate supporters are drawn from those earning in excess of £100,000.

In a classic piece of Orwellian doublespeak, the prime minister directly addressed the party faithful. "The trouble is even now," he intoned, "even after the lessons of 18 years of opposition followed by two terms of government, we still think [the Conservatives are] the party of government, they're the ruling class and we're not part of it. And we're not. Neither should we be. But the point is: Britain doesn't need a ruling class today. The rulers are the people."

Translated into English, this should read:

"We are in government. We want to remain in government. And this means doing what the ruling class wants us to and calling this 'People Power.' "

There are pathetically few within Labour's eviscerated ranks who will ignore such an injunction.

Its nominal "left" has been reduced to an irrelevance, whose mealy-mouthed opposition on such issues as the Iraq war and the privatisation of public services is entirely subordinate to their loyalty to the Labour Party machine. In the coming weeks and months, they will to a man unite behind Blair to secure another Labour victory—proclaiming this as the best way of defending the interests of working people, while in reality safeguarding their own interests at the expense of those who look to them for a political lead.



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