

Despair and resignation characterise British elite's response to Bush victory

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
6 November 2004

Outside of the most overtly right-wing press, there was a palpable sense of dismay within Britain's media and its ruling circles that George W. Bush had won a second presidential term.

With the exception of Prime Minister Tony Blair, all reports indicate that Labour MPs and ministers were universally desirous of a win for Democrat contender John Kerry. They hoped for two things: to be able to distance the party from its massively unpopular stance in support of the Bush's illegal war against Iraq, while at the same time maintaining Britain's relationship with the US—including continued participation in the occupation of Iraq—with a president more receptive to a multilateral approach.

The same position was taken by much of the Blair supporting press, though Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* and *Times* newspapers could hardly contain their glee at what they saw as a right-wing triumph and a promise of yet more tax cuts for the rich.

The Liberal Democrats were more firmly in favour of a Democrat victory. But perhaps more surprising was that the Conservatives too were said to overwhelmingly favour Kerry. Although firm supporters of the Iraq war and the "war on terror," Bush's close political alliance with Blair had seen the Tories locked-out of any contact with their long-time Republican allies, especially after Conservative leader Michael Howard had criticised the prime minister for not being honest over Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction. The hope was that a Kerry victory would damage the prime minister, without jeopardising the military occupation of Iraq.

As for the Civil Service, following the election, the *Guardian's* Ewan MacAskill and Patrick Wintour noted what they described as "a strong feeling in Whitehall yesterday that foreign policy would have been easier if John Kerry had won the US presidential election."

A significant factor in the desire for a Kerry presidency was the negative domestic impact of a continued alliance with Bush. Opinion polls in the run-up to the presidential ballot had recorded up to 80 percent of Britons hoping for Bush's defeat.

Blair was therefore almost alone amongst senior politicians in desiring Bush's re-election. After the return of John Howard in Australia, this would allow him to insist that his pro-war stance had been vindicated and that, whatever the disagreements of the past, the popular view was now that supporting the supposed transition to democracy in Iraq was the priority.

A number of headlines and editorials on November 4 spoke to shock amongst sections of the ruling elite that their hopes that America's two-party system would deliver a change in the US administration without any fundamental change in its strategy had been dashed.

The *Mirror* could barely contain its bile. "How can 59,017,382 people be so dumb?," its front page asked, whilst the newspaper

opined: "With another four Bush years ahead, the future looks desperate. For us in Britain it could be particularly bad. If Tony Blair continues his sycophantic following of the President we will become still more isolated. The situation in Iraq is bad enough. But Mr. Bush wants to go after Iran next."

The right-wing *Daily Mail*, while congratulating Bush, expressed its lack of confidence in his presidency. "He didn't win, after all, because he is universally admired. Millions loathe him with a passion. He was simply lucky to have the lacklustre, flip-flopping John Kerry as a rival, a man who never resonated with Middle America as a leader who could be trusted. The fact is, the US under Bush is more deeply divided than at any time in living memory.

"Abroad, the story is even bleaker.... Given his doctrine of preemptive war and record of unilateral action, might he attack Iran, with its nuclear ambitions? Or take military action against other rogue states?"

"This paper sincerely prays not."

Immediately following the announcement that Kerry had conceded the contest, Blair did the usual diplomatic niceties—congratulating Bush on his success, whilst praising Kerry for running a strong campaign.

Within hours, all pretence at impartiality was abandoned. In an interview with the *Times* newspaper on November 5, he complained that "some people" in Europe were in "a sort of state of denial" in not recognising that Bush had won.

"The election has happened, America has spoken, the rest of the world should listen," he continued.

The prime minister's respect for electoral legitimacy is a new turn. For four years he had stayed silent on Bush's stealing of the 2000 election, because it served the geo-political interests of British imperialism. Now, ignoring the tremendous fissures in US society, Blair seeks to use the 2004 election result for the same end.

"I am not being dragged reluctantly to support President Bush... I believe it is an important part of our security," he said.

Blair went on to express his full support for Bush's imperialist foreign policy: "When the Americans say we want to extend democracy to these countries, or extend democracy and human rights throughout the Middle East in the Greater Middle East Initiative, people say, well, that is part of the neo-conservative agenda. Actually, if you put it in different language, it is a progressive agenda."

Britain, he boasted, was uniquely placed to "find the common ground upon which we can agree. There will be areas where we cannot, and climate change may end up being one of them. But there are a lot upon which we can agree and it is important so far as possible that Europe and America do agree."

His only caveat was that “it does also require America to be prepared to reach out. You don’t get a partnership except on a basis of equality.”

On this it is Blair that is in denial. There has scarcely been a more unequal partnership in political history. He is hopelessly at sea in believing Britain’s position has been strengthened by Bush’s return to office and that he can in any significant way determine US policy.

Bush and his neo-conservative and Christian fundamentalist backers believe they have a mandate to do whatever they wish and can force their will both on the US electorate and on their European rivals.

Having recovered from their obvious shock at the result, Britain’s media pundits are busy reconciling themselves to it—promoting Blair and Bush’s false claim that the elections have bestowed legitimacy on a further outburst of US imperialist aggression, so as to justify their own support for it.

In its inimitable spineless style, the *Guardian* editorialised, “Mr. Bush, in other words, has a mandate of the kind he did not have before.... We may not like it. In fact, to tell the truth, we don’t like it one bit. But if it isn’t a mandate, then the word has no meaning. Mr. Bush has won fair (so far as we can see) and square. He and his country—and the rest of the world—now have to deal with it.

“We have few illusions about the course he will take. Yet both America and the world need a handshake right now, not a clenched fist of defiance.”

Simon Jenkins in the *Times* wrote, “Mr. Bush’s election will give the rest of the world a collective heart attack. It expected Mr. Kerry to win. At very least it expected Americans somehow to rein in a man it sees as naive and dangerously belligerent, with views it finds hard to distinguish from the fundamentalism he so opposes. Americans declined to rein him in. They legitimised him. The rest of the world has been roundly snubbed.”

Nevertheless, he continued, “I wrote two weeks ago that a second-term Mr. Bush might soften his pitch.... Having won re-election, I argued, Mr. Bush could pull in his horns and restore good relations with the world.... I still incline to that view.”

Right-wing Tory MP Boris Johnson, whose *Spectator* magazine backed Bush, wrote in the *Telegraph*, “for all our sakes Blair must now make sure that Bush delivers.

“[Bush] can use all his influence...to speed Ariel Sharon in his plan for disengagement from Gaza and, we must hope, from almost all of the rest of the occupied territories.... And if Bush won’t act, then Blair must insist, publicly, that he does.”

He adds somewhat pathetically, “If Bush is about to unleash violence against Fallujah, then we deserve, as coalition members, to be consulted.”

There is not a mention in any of these writings about the illegal and criminal character of the war against Iraq and the ongoing occupation. Rather, writing in the *Daily Mail*, Max Hastings, referring to imminent US offensive against Fallujah, states, “Fire and the sword will be the first fruits of yesterday’s outcome,” whilst prophesising future military action against Iran.

Dismissing the claim that London had any real say over US policy, Hastings asks, “Where do we—and above all the 8,000 British troops in Iraq—go from here? No one in Whitehall will address the question publicly because they know that the answer is entirely at the mercy of American policy, and ultimately of Bush.”

Nonetheless, Hastings insisted that the successful suppression of Fallujah was vital. All that Britons could hope for is that Blair “briefly cast off his poodle’s curls and ask the President now to outline a

future policy for Iraq which the British people can understand and reluctantly support, and which possesses a faint hope of success.”

Robin Cook, who resigned from Blair’s cabinet over the Iraq war, was no better. The Bush administration would “now celebrate their election victory by putting Fallujah to the torch,” he wrote in the *Guardian*.

He concluded his piece by supposing “Osama bin Laden must be as gratified as Dick Cheney that George Bush is back.”

Cook was by no means setting out a principled opposition to the bloodbath now being prepared in Iraq. Rather, he cynically advised the prime minister that he should redouble his efforts to extract some form of quid pro quo for Britain’s participation in the slaughter of the Iraqi people.

“The unpopularity at home and abroad of his ally’s reliance on overwhelming fire power will make it even more essential for Blair to obtain something in return for his support,” Cook wrote. His favoured strategy for doing so is for Blair to work more closely with the major European powers, most notably France and Germany, in securing concessions from Washington.

Only Philip Stephens in the *Financial Times*, November 5, dared to say something approaching the truth:

“For Americans and Europeans alike, every familiar point on the geopolitical map of the past 50 years has been erased.”

What many had hoped “would prove an interlude in America’s strategic posture, an understandable but temporary response to the shock of September 11, 2001, must now be understood as a permanent realignment.”

Stephens concluded, “For now, the world looks an ever more perilous place; and what we long ago come to know as ‘the west’ is navigating with a broken compass.”

As if to emphasise Washington’s disdain for European political sensibilities, the *Independent* of November 5 reported, “Washington waded into a diplomatic crisis yesterday, less than 24 hours after the US election result, recognising the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) by its controversially truncated name ‘Macedonia.’ The first major policy move since President Bush won a second term was done without consulting the European Union, and flies in the face of strong opposition.”



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