

Blair defends Iraq war, vows new attacks on civil liberties and social conditions

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's July 26 press conference was a sharp warning that his government will intensify both its pro-war alliance with Washington abroad and the imposition of sweeping attacks on civil liberties at home.

Blair's last monthly press conference before his summer break was held amidst unprecedented events. Just days before, armed police had summarily executed 27-year old Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes in a London subway carriage, firing seven bullets into his head and one into his body at point-blank range as he was pinned to the floor by other officers.

Government ministers, police and the media have sought to portray de Menezes' killing as the unintended consequence of anti-terrorist measures made necessary by the July 7 bombings in the capital that killed 56 people.

In fact, the young electrician was the innocent victim of a shoot-to-kill policy secretly adopted by police two years ago, without any discussion in parliament, much less public debate.

The *Guardian* quoted a police source stating that under this new policy, "there is no need for officers to verbally warn a suspect before opening fire." This admission, together with Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair's earlier warning that more innocent people could be gunned down by police, confirms that the state has been given a licence to kill with impunity under the guise of the "war on terror."

The prime minister offered no accounting for these developments. Asked whether he had approved the shoot-to-kill policy, he replied, "off-hand I can't remember whether I have ever had a discussion about it," but that "if the police had ever talked to me about it I would have agreed with what they said."

While giving a cheque for police state measures, Blair did not bother to even mention de Menezes by name.

At the same time the prime minister reiterated his intention to aggressively pursue a foreign policy that has

made Britain a target for terrorist outrages, and outlined an agenda of deepening social attacks.

His remarks confirm that the turn to imperialist war and the accompanying abrogation of democratic rights is being propelled by the massive class polarisation within Britain, and a deepening offensive against the social conditions of working people.

Blair began by outlining a raft of new "anti-terror" measures that fundamentally undermine the right to free speech and political expression, and represent a significant intrusion by the state into individual privacy.

These include making it an offence to "condone" terrorism, increasing the duration that police can hold people without charge from 14 days to three months, and powers to close down "extreme" bookshops, publications and web sites.

This was followed by his announcement that new plans are being drawn up to further facilitate the privatisation of health care provision and the dismantling of comprehensive education. Also on the agenda are greater inroads into welfare benefit entitlements and the strengthening of law and order measures targeted at the most deprived and vulnerable sections of the population.

The remainder of the press conference was taken up with the prime minister's continued denial that there is any connection between Britain's participation in the US-led war on Iraq and the July 7 bombings.

When one reporter pointed out that the majority of Britons regard this connection as patently obvious and that his claims to the contrary "appear to be insulting the intelligence of the British people," Blair replied, "Of course people are going to use Iraq and Afghanistan" to "try and recruit and motivate people." But these were just "excuses," he said, adding, "I do not believe we should give one inch to them."

"Not in this country and the way we live our lives here, not in Iraq, not in Afghanistan, not in our support for two

States, Israel and Palestine, not in our support for the alliances we choose, including with America, not one inch should we give to these people.”

Blair’s technique is that of the big lie: Iraq is only an issue insofar as extremists use it as an excuse to recruit people to their cause, he argues. Rather, Iraq is witnessing the “rebirth” of democracy that the terrorists are determined to thwart utilising any pretext.

But the endless repetition of a lie does not make it so. Blair’s argument only begs the question: if Iraq—not to mention Afghanistan and Palestine—are the success stories that he claims, why are they proving such effective recruiting tools?

Blair conspired with the Bush administration to wage a war of aggression against Iraq for reasons of Great Power geo-political strategy. To this end, the British government falsified intelligence reports and trampled on international law.

An invasion and military occupation prepared and commissioned on such a criminal basis could never give birth to a democracy. As a direct result of these actions, Iraq has been plunged into a bloody nightmare and tens of thousands of civilians have lost their lives.

This reality, combined with decades of imperialist meddling in the Middle East, has fuelled hatred against the US and British governments—one reactionary and entirely foreseeable outcome of which has been an increase in terror attacks.

Blair cannot acknowledge this fact. To do so would confirm that his slavish subservience to US imperialism and the requirements of British capital was responsible for war crimes against the Iraqi people, as well as the reckless endangerment of the lives and “the way we live our lives” of the UK population.

It would also lead inexorably to the conclusion that the only means to end terrorism is ending the policy that gives rise to it in the first place—beginning with the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq.

But Blair continues to insist that resistance to foreign occupation in Iraq is simply a matter of terrorism, which has no broad based support, much less legitimacy. “All the instability in Iraq would stop tomorrow if these terrorists and insurgents stopped,” he said, drawing an equal sign between the two.

When one reporter noted that just as “the IRA wanted us out of Ireland...a lot of these people just want us, rightly or wrongly, out of the Middle East, out of Islam, and everybody in this room knows that,” Blair fell back on sophistry.

The demands of Irish republicanism had widespread support, he replied, which is why the British government was now involved in negotiations for a power-sharing assembly, whereas Britain now faced “a different type of fight or struggle” against terrorism; one that had no demands that “any sensible person can negotiate on.”

In fact Irish demands for “Brits out” and an end to colonial occupation is also the basic demand raised in Iraq and across the Middle East, with the support of millions in the UK.

Any examination of the role and responsibility of US and British imperialism is ruled out of order, however. It is necessary to “eliminate” any questioning of the military intervention in Iraq, Blair said.

“It is time we stopped saying OK we abhor their methods, but we kind of see something in their ideas or maybe they have got a sliver of excuse or justification.”

We must not “get into the thought process that says it is our behaviour that should change. If we did something different, these people would react in a different way,” he warned.

In his efforts to deny any political basis for hostility to Britain and the US, Blair resorted to terms that mirror those of Osama bin Laden. The world is engaged in an ideological war, he argued, in which the democracies of the US and Britain are engaged in battle with an evil fundamentalism determined to overthrow western civilisation.

Blair’s so-called battle of “ideologies” is a pretext aimed at criminalising all political opposition to war and the policies of British imperialism.

Referring to the prime minister’s proposal to ban books and other publications, a reporter asked if this would not be seen as “draconian,” querying, “how far can you, or should you, confront those ideas beyond what is in existing law by telling people what they can and can’t buy or read?”

In response, Blair said “there are difficulties,” but added they were mainly of a “technical” nature.



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