

Blair, Murdoch and the oligarchy

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As Tony Blair once again lines up behind another US-backed war in the Middle East, in defiance of public opinion, millions might ask just whom Britain's prime minister really represents. The answer was made clear this week, and not only by his joint appearance with US President George W. Bush.

Blair's July 28 White House press conference took on a major significance due to events in Lebanon. But his flight to America was in fact planned months ago so that he could address the annual gathering of the executives and journalists of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

Even given the political imperative of solidarising himself with Bush, Blair spent just a few hours at the White House before flying to California to begin five days of engagements addressing movers and shakers in the business world, of which Murdoch's gathering was the centrepiece.

Media reports of the News Corp. event would lend the impression that Blair was the star of the show. But that is in no small part due to the veil of secrecy drawn over the gathering in an attempt to spare the political blushes of others seeking to curry favour with the media magnate.

The panel of leading politicians assembled by Murdoch provides an insight into the domination of a global financial oligarchy over world affairs. Indeed, the title of U2 singer Bono's talk on his campaign against poverty and AIDS—"The Power of One"—is a more fitting description of the gathering in California.

Joining Blair at the exclusive Pebble Beach resort were former President Bill Clinton and his wife and potential Democrat presidential candidate Hillary; former US Vice President Al Gore; the current frontrunner for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, Senator John McCain; and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

In addition to the stellar Republican-Democrat line-up, Israeli Vice Premier Shimon Peres scheduled time out from waging war against Lebanon to make a speech on "Islam and the West."

Blair stands out from the crowd only in the extent of his

reliance on the backing of Murdoch's media empire. He even used his speech on "leadership in the modern world" as part of his ongoing efforts to defend himself from criticism over his support for Washington and Tel Aviv.

Nevertheless, this does not alter the fact that all those in attendance were hawking themselves to the man who is undoubtedly the world's highest bidder.

As Blair departed from Britain, there were reports that Murdoch might offer him a position in News Corp. after he leaves office. If so he would join former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Marie Aznar, another staunch supporter of the US-led war in Iraq. For his part, Bill Clinton—who closed the event—also has direct ties to Murdoch. News Corp. Executive Vice President Gary Ginsberg was a lawyer in the Clinton White House, and last month Murdoch hosted a New York fundraiser for Hillary.

Even if Blair does not take up a job offer, he remains Murdoch's creature.

Consider the implications of his devoting himself to the Pebble Beach jamboree at a time when the world is facing such a major political crisis. Blair can hardly be bothered to maintain the pretence that he functions as the political representative of the British people. As far as his policy goes, it is stamped "Made in America" and copyrighted by News Corp.

Blair considers Murdoch as his most important and strategic backer, someone whose publications such as the *Sun* make him a political kingmaker. This view is shared by Murdoch.

In a recent candid hour-long interview on US public television, Murdoch boasted of his ability to set the political agenda of the Blair government. "Right now we are giving them a bad time," he said. "We've supported him, but we fought him pretty hard on Europe. We said, stay away from there. He's come around." His newspapers had also set the government's agenda regarding "the breakdown of law and order in Britain and the thuggishness and the social behaviour that has come about through mistaken changes in the law."

When asked whether he would transfer his allegiances

to Chancellor Gordon Brown, Blair's likely successor, or switch to supporting the Conservatives, Murdoch replied, "I would like to see, well before the next election, a match up between Brown and the new Conservative leadership and just see how they look."

Blair's relationship with Murdoch is only the most high-profile of his dealings with big business. There is a question here of immediate self-interest. Not a few commentators have pointed out that when Blair leaves office, he will be able to make millions from the lecture circuit in the US. His audience will be fabulously rich and overwhelmingly right-wing. His visit to California will, at least in part, have been aimed at consolidating the network of contacts required to launch such a post-governmental career.

However, it is not just Blair that is politically on sale. He went to California as the representative of Labour PLC—a party that functions as an instrument of a global financial oligarchy at whose behest it slashes public expenditure, cuts corporate taxes, privatises public utilities and conducts an aggressive militarist foreign policy.

Blair's broader itinerary in California is revealing. Prior to his Pebble Beach engagement, he was the guest of George Shultz, secretary of state under President Ronald Reagan and a leading member of the so-called "Vulcans"—key neo-con policy advisers to Bush including Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz. Shultz is also on the board of the US engineering giant Bechtel, whose company is bidding to build facilities for the 2012 London Olympics in London.

Blair also met with numerous other CEOs, including John Chambers, the chief executive of Cisco Systems, which is seeking government contracts in IT that include the new biometric identity card scheme.

The prime minister's speech to the News Corp. executives, full as it was with his usual hyperbole and grandiose moralising, was also politically instructive.

Explaining why he had opposed an immediate ceasefire in the Lebanon, he said that it was necessary to "deal with the underlying causes of confrontation," whose roots "reach right down into a more basic struggle: between those who want to embrace and those who resist the modern world."

Blair presented this as a struggle between Islamic fundamentalism and Western democratic values, but for him the "modern world" more correctly means the right of global corporations to plunder the oil reserves of the Middle East.

Recognising the imperatives of globalisation must also dictate politics in the advanced capitalist countries, he stressed. Blair repeated his claim that there is no longer any significance in the traditional division between left and right. He added that the fundamental fault line in politics was now "open versus closed."

"The response to globalisation can be free trade, open markets, investment in the means of competition: education, science, technology. Or it can be protectionism, tariffs, tight labour market regulation, resistance to foreign takeovers," Blair said. "The traditional European welfare state and social model is hopelessly inadequate to meet the challenge of the modern competitive global market," and also that "traditional civil liberty arguments are not so much wrong, as just made for another age."

"The most misunderstood speech I ever made was my Party Conference speech of 1999 about 'the forces of conservatism,' " he continued. "This was taken as an assault on Conservatives. Actually it was an assault on small 'c' conservatism, resistance to change, which can be every bit as much from the left as from the right."

Blair's bracketing of Islamic terrorism alongside those opposed to the destruction of the welfare state and concerned with the preservation of democratic rights is truly chilling.

Let it not be forgotten that on the eve of his remarks, Israel's military machine—with the backing of US and Britain—was reducing Qana to rubble in the name of the "war against terror." For weeks, Blair has opposed all calls for a ceasefire and demonstrated his supreme indifference to the terrible suffering of the Lebanese people. He continues to do so, knowing that this will have earned him kudos from both Murdoch and Bush.

But Blair's attitude to Lebanon is only the most debased aspect of a political agenda founded on contempt for the democratic and social aspirations of working people the world over and a determination that nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of the interests of the oligarchy. That is what has earned Blair a favoured place at Murdoch's table.



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