

Britain: Blair government defeats calls for Iraq inquiry

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The ability of British Prime Minister Tony Blair to defeat calls for an inquiry into the Iraq war testifies to the insulation of the parliamentary process from any genuine democratic control.

It is more than two years since there was a full debate in the House of Commons on the Iraq war. In that time, the already massive opposition to the US-led invasion has become more entrenched—fuelled by the catastrophic situation created by the occupation. The vast bulk of the British electorate believe that Blair dragged the country into war based on lies and that the troops should be withdrawn.

Yet on November 1, the Blair government was able to face down a motion calling for an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the invasion by 298 votes to 273.

The circumstances surrounding the vote are politically instructive. The motion was brought by the two small nationalist parties, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru, and merely called for a committee of seven leading members of Parliament (MPs) to review “the way in which the responsibilities of government were discharged in relation to Iraq.”

It was then backed by the much larger Liberal Democrat Party, which has 63 MPs and which had opposed the Iraq war. But the possibility of a defeat for the Blair government was made real by the Conservative Party’s decision to support the motion. Until now, the Conservatives have supported Blair on Iraq—guaranteeing the government a majority even if it faced a substantial rebellion by Labour MPs.

The decision of the Conservative (Tory) Party to endorse the motion was not primarily an effort to exploit popular anti-war sentiment. That party’s attitude towards public opinion is much the same as the government’s. Rather, the volte face was motivated by concerns within the bourgeoisie about the extent of the crisis that Iraq has produced for British capital.

Recent weeks have seen statements by top military personnel, such as head of the army General Sir Richard Dannat, as well as numerous think tanks and analysts proclaiming the Iraq occupation to be a foreign policy

disaster worse than the Suez crisis of 1956. In the United States, where anti-war sentiment is a majority position in the electorate, Iraq has dominated the congressional election campaign. Significant sections of the US and British ruling elite are anxious that the worsening quagmire in Iraq is jeopardising their broader geopolitical ambitions for the whole of the Middle East and beyond.

Amongst these layers, an inquiry of the character proposed in Parliament would be a vehicle for making the required “corrections” in neo-colonial strategy. In particular, it would seek to redress what sections of the bourgeoisie consider to have been a fatal compromising of the national interests of British imperialism on the part of the Blair government in pursuit of its “special relationship” with the US.

Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell argued from such a standpoint in favour of the motion, asking during the parliamentary debate, “Isn’t it now the time for a British strategy based on British priorities and not one which depends on the outcome of the American elections?”

Even given these strategic imperatives, the Tories were hamstrung by their own record on Iraq and their overriding concern that any inquiry not endanger either the ongoing Iraq occupation or the interests of British imperialism. To this end, they called for the inquiry to be held sometime over the next 12 months, consisting of private hearings under former military personnel. It was only when the government refused to concede to any inquiry that the Conservatives backed the motion.

Despite this reluctance, the Tories’ manoeuvring did serve to expose any pretence of significant oppositional sentiment within the Parliamentary Labour Party. Only 12 Labour MPs, as well as Clare Short, who last month quit the party, voted against the government. This is not even half of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs, which constitutes the official left wing of the party and whose chair, John McDonnell, has announced he will stand for Labour leader when Blair finally resigns.

The scale of this collapse by the nominal “left” within the Labour Party can be judged by comparison with the

oppositional vote over the war in 2003. On March 18 of that year, 139 Labour dissidents voted for an amendment opposing the invasion. But immediately war began, the vast majority of Labour dissidents fell into line. By June 4, 2003, only 11 Labour MPs supported a Liberal Democrat motion calling for an inquiry into whether the government had misled parliament over Iraq's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction.

In the three years since then, nothing has changed this political balance of forces within the Labour Party. The same handful of MPs register their formal protest, while the rest justify their support for Blair with claims that they "cannot stomach" voting with the Tories or doing anything that could endanger British troops.

Such arguments are grotesque. The Labour lefts have had no such difficulty in stomaching the government's lies and attacks on democratic rights, or reconciling themselves to a war that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives, including scores of British troops.

The inability of parliament to even debate Iraq prompted *Guardian* political columnist Simon Jenkins to observe that "This House of Commons is God's gift to dictatorship." Parliament had surrendered its "democratic function," he continued, with opposition MPs rendered "incapable of performing democracy's simplest ritual, challenging the executive."

But how has this situation come about? Jenkins concentrates his fire on the failure of the opposition parties to hold the government to account, at one point declaring that the "Commons has become little more than an electoral college for the prime minister." He insists that parliament has powers it has not used, explaining, "There is nothing to stop MPs debating what they like. There is nothing to stop a grand committee being appointed to inquire into the war. It can demand 'persons and papers' and subpoena anyone it likes. Even if select committees are too scared of the whips to act, Parliament is sovereign. It need not ask Downing Street's permission to scrutinise."

This misses the point. Who is supposed to do this?

Jenkins, in effect, berates the Tory opposition—the traditional party of big business—for its failure to bring a nominally Labour government to account. But parliamentary democracy has in reality been stripped of much of its actual substance by the fact that—whatever their tactical disagreements—all the major parties agree in principle on a course of militarism and social reaction, and all of them rest on an increasingly narrow social base of support anchored within the most privileged social layers.

Central to this evisceration of the democratic process is the transformation of the Labour Party into an instrument of a financial oligarchy.

The extension of democratic rights to working people was the product of mass political action conducted through the methods of the class struggle, which culminated at the beginning of the twentieth century in the formation of the Labour Party as the political representative of the trade unions. Labour's degeneration and that of the unions themselves mean that the political views and social concerns of the working class no longer find even limited expression within the machinery of government. Rather, the business of government is predicated on preventing any popular interference with policies that are decided in the boardrooms of the major corporations and that are fundamentally opposed to the interests of the majority of the population.

Ultimately, the decline of parliamentary democracy is an expression of the acute and irreconcilable class antagonisms wracking society. It is impossible to secure a democratic mandate for war and colonial conquest, paid for through the gutting of social programmes and the impoverishment of working people. Official politics becomes a conspiracy against the social and democratic rights of the masses.

It is precisely because maintaining the political disenfranchisement of the working class is of such overriding importance that the bourgeoisie is unable to frankly examine an issue of such strategic import as Iraq. This accounts for the political paralysis identified by Jenkins—one that is highly destabilising for the ruling elite.

Even if the Iraq debacle should finally prompt a move against the Blair government by a section of the ruling elite—an outcome that can by no means be excluded—nothing progressive would result.

Everything now depends on the independent mobilisation of workers, youth and students against the Labour government and all the representatives of big business. At the centre of this is the building of a new and genuinely socialist party.



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