Britain: Blair stirs up Islamophobia

Julie Hyland
12 December 2006

On his return from Washington, Prime Minister Tony Blair gave a speech to a selected audience at his Downing Street residence. The subject of his remarks was not the criticisms made by the Iraq Study Group of US—and by implication British—foreign policy failures in Iraq. Instead he sought to deflect any examination of his criminal war policy by launching yet another provocative attack on Muslims.

Blair's abject appearance alongside President George W. Bush at the White House had led one commentator in the British press to label him a "dead man walking." His Downing Street speech confirmed how entirely dependent the prime minister is for his political survival on a narrow, right-wing social base.

His remarks on "Our Nation's Future" were peppered with defensive references to Labour's long-standing policy of "multiculturalism." This is a bête noire of the right in Britain, who complain that its advocacy of welcoming and "celebrating" ethnic and religious differences has "diluted" British national identity.

Blair echoed such claims in his Downing Street speech. The July 7 bombings in London, which killed 52 people, have "thrown into sharp relief, the nature of what we have called, with approval, 'multicultural Britain.'"

"There is an unease, an anxiety, even at points a resentment" that Britain's "openness, our willingness to welcome difference, our pride in being home to many cultures, is being used against us; abused, indeed, in order to harm us," he continued.

Blair pitched his remarks as being directed against a minority of radical Muslim extremists, "particularly [those] originating from certain countries" who had a "duty to integrate" into British society.

Cynically he continued, "Our tolerance is part of what makes Britain, Britain. Conform to it; or don't come here."

In fact, the July 7 bombings were carried out by British-born Muslims who, the prime minister admitted, "were integrated ... in terms of lifestyle and work." But Blair's evocation of an alien presence in the midst of Britain was intended as a coded appeal—his "don't come here" not so far removed from the demand of the extreme right that ethnic minorities "get out."

There is something immensely distasteful about a lecture on "integration" from a man whose support for the US-led pre-emptive war on Iraq, and the subsequent American and British takeover of the country, has been accompanied by the deliberate stoking of sectarian divisions.

Within Britain itself, as Labour ditched its previous social reformist policies, it has sought to encourage identity policies based on the promotion of religious and racial differences. Now Blair turns around and damns his own policy, but does so from the right. Though his remarks specifically targeted Muslim extremists, they dovetail neatly with more general anti-immigrant propaganda.

In his London speech, Blair claimed that integration was not about "culture or lifestyle," but went on to assert that it meant accepting "common unifying British values." All religions have a "perfect right to their own identity and religion, to practice their faith and to conform to their culture," he said, explaining that "equality of respect and treatment for all citizens" was a key British value.

But Blair's paean to religious freedom was immediately contradicted by his assertion that "Being British carries ... duties. And those duties take clear precedence over any cultural or religious practice."

In a blatant infringement of religious and cultural liberties, Blair made clear his support for restrictions on the Muslim veil and implied his backing for the sacking of Aishah Azmi, a Muslim teaching assistant, for

© World Socialist Web Site

refusing to remove her veil in the classroom. “It really is a matter of plain common sense that when it is an essential part of someone’s work to communicate directly with people, being able to see their face is important,” he said.

As to “equality” for all citizens, this was further belied by Blair’s announcement that the Equal Opportunities Commission is to look at restrictions on women in place in some mosques. But he made no suggestion that some Anglican and Evangelical churches be subject to similar inquiries for their opposition to the ordination of women priests and their campaign against homosexual rights legislation, let alone the Catholic Church.

Blair complained that in the past money had been “too freely awarded” to groups representing different religions and racial groups, as “very good intentions got the better of us.” In future, grants would “promote integration as well as help distinctive cultural identity.”

Again this is entirely selective. Blair pledged tough action against Muslim madrassas that fail to comply, but he said nothing about other religious schools. Indeed, he quoted approvingly the 1988 Education Reform Act which states that religious education in all state schools “should be broadly Christian in character.”

Blair’s speech was intended to whip up a right-wing constituency behind his ongoing military adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan and to reinforce his clam that radical Islam represents an existential threat to Britain. To this end, and to legitimize the repressive and antidemocratic measures his government has enacted in the so-called “war on terror,” he has identified swathes of British Muslims as the “enemy within.”

This is now an established pattern. The government’s response to any and every questioning of its foreign and domestic agenda is to resort to the crudest forms of political propaganda based on nationalism, xenophobia and efforts to panic the population with the threat of terrorist atrocities.

In keeping with this, Blair’s speech was followed by a statement by Home Secretary John Reid that an attempted terrorist attack in Britain was “highly likely” in the run-up to Christmas. Interviewed on GMTV’s Sunday morning programme, Reid said, “The threat in this country is very high indeed ... We know that the number of conspiracies of a major type are in the tens—thirty or round about that.”

Reid’s statement was typically vague. No details were given of any of the supposed “conspiracies,” even as he warned that the battle against terror would continue for “longer than a generation.”

Like Blair’s remarks, Reid’s interview was not intended to illuminate the public but to whip up fear. With Blair stoking up Islamophobia, it was Reid’s job to pour oil on the fire.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site