

The Trial of Tony Blair: What would it take to put the prime minister in the dock?

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23 January 2007

At one point in Alistair Beaton's latest political satire, *The Trial of Tony Blair*, Cherie Blair (Phoebe Nicholls) rounds on husband Tony (Robert Lindsay) saying, "The world's changed and you don't get it." Where Beaton falls down is in his depiction of how this change manifests itself and leads to Blair standing in the dock facing war crimes charges.

It is 2010. Blair, having stayed in office longer than promised, has finally stepped down before the general election. His last days in office take place as the US and Israel target Iranian nuclear facilities.

Chancellor Gordon Brown finally gets his chance at the head of both the Labour Party and the government, but he is left facing the massive disaffection left from the Blair years. The film shows an upsurge in Labour support after Blair's departure, but Brown being reelected as prime minister with his majority reduced to just two seats. Hillary Clinton, the new president of the United States, is attempting to deal with popular hostility to the Iraq war and the foreign policy of George W. Bush, who we are told "is back in rehab."

Trying to distance themselves from their predecessors, neither new head of state uses his or her veto at the United Nations to prevent the setting up of a Tribunal on War Crimes in Iraq as part of the International Criminal Court at The Hague. Blair, who unlike the US had supported the ICC when it was founded, is extradited to face trial as a war criminal.

The programme was first aired on one of Channel 4's digital channels, and repeated shortly afterwards on the terrestrial channel.

The significance of a mainstream channel producing a programme depicting the incumbent prime minister as a war criminal should not be underestimated. And it should be noted that *The Trial of Tony Blair* has been produced by figures once close to the Labour leadership—Beaton was for a time a speechwriter for Gordon Brown.

The programme-makers (writer Beaton, executive producer David Aukin, and director Simon Cellan Jones) developed it as a satire. But its central contention would not be shocking to the majority of people in Britain. Nor is it the

only such piece in production. North London's Tricycle Theatre is calling legal teams and witnesses to argue whether there is a case for trying Blair as a war criminal. They will then produce a condensed version of events entitled *The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression Against Iraq—A Hearing*.

Talking about Blair in the *Guardian*, Robert Lindsay, who supports Labour, commented, "Tony's been found out. We all know he's a fraud, so it's curtains for him." Iraq, despite all of Blair's protestations throughout the film, is most definitely his "legacy."

Further, the drama indicts others for their role in Iraq, including Brown (Peter Mullan). He voted for the war, Blair points out, but kept quiet about it. As pressure mounts for the establishment of a war crimes tribunal at The Hague, Brown throws his hated rival to the wolves by instructing the British ambassador to the UN to stay in the toilet during the UN vote. Even his attempts to draw a line under the Blair era are based on lies. "The public don't want charisma any more," he tells Blair, "they want honesty."

"And they got you," comes Blair's reply.

Cherie Blair mainly worries about the family income, while being more acutely aware of the dangers Blair faces. Conservative leader David Cameron (Alexander Armstrong) is merely a buffoon.

Blair is portrayed as somewhat delusional—a man who believed that he was doing the right thing in Iraq and is now plagued by self-doubt, even remorse. On the surface of things, he is only interested in his memoirs, establishing a Blair Foundation and becoming an advisor in Washington rather than in the political realities he has helped create. He switches off the television when British troops' deaths are reported from Iraq. The publisher of his memoirs laughs at his 29 uses of the phrase, "I felt history's hand upon my shoulder."

But Blair becomes increasingly haunted by Iraq. He sees a coffin draped in a British flag, and has visions of dead Iraqi children. In echoes of Lady Macbeth, he scrubs at his hands obsessively to remove stains. Having converted to

Catholicism as soon as he left office, he is seen trying to confess what he says are “mortal sins.”

The Trial of Tony Blair expresses, if only partially and in a distorted way, the depth of public sentiment against the war and its authors. It is this that earned the ire of Gerard Baker in the *Sunday Times*.

“It’s hardly even controversial these days to talk of the Prime Minister in this way,” he complains. Baker berated the “liberal establishment” for their criticisms of Blair over Iraq, describing them significantly as “the educated opinion-formers of our times.”

“Imagine the raucous, triumphant, mocking Shia at Saddam Hussein’s execution—minus the beards—and you have a sense of what most of these people feel about the Prime Minister,” he continues, calling their treatment of Blair, “their Nuremberg.”

However, for all their criticisms of figures within the Labour Party, and indeed the political establishment generally, the response of those involved in producing the drama is an example of liberal wishful thinking. They are clearly angry over the carnage Blair and Bush have wrought in Iraq—Cellan Jones called the piece “an act of fury”—but they never get beyond that. They cannot understand how Bush can act as he does, so they put him back in rehab. They cannot understand why Blair does not feel remorse, so they create a scenario where he does.

Their approach must also be understood within another context. Some at least within the establishment would like Blair to be made to carry the can in some way, in an effort to exculpate their own “sins” and restore some confidence in the democratic process: If not over Iraq, with its attendant dangers, then perhaps over the cash-for-peerages allegations.

In reality, to portray Blair facing trial over Iraq as the product of such a combination of personal and electoral considerations, particularly a turn by the Democrats in the US and a Brown-led Labour government to appease antiwar sentiment, can be politically disorienting. And the same is true for the depiction of the role of the UN.

No explanation is ever offered by Beaton’s piece as to why the recent bombing of Iran has given way to efforts to project a more peaceful foreign policy. The assumption is that the pressure of the electorate has, despite the political corruption of the elites, restored sanity to official politics on both sides of the Atlantic. Iraq and Iran are essentially portrayed as the awful product of bad leaders. Lindsay, in the *Guardian*, blamed Bush for the invasion of Iraq and asked plaintively, “Why didn’t Blair stand up to him?”

In reality, the rise of the Republicans in the US and New Labour in Britain was a response to the escalating crisis of world imperialism. The invasion of Iraq was not accidental, or a “mistake” by individual leaders. It was a calculated and

planned action, part of the drive by the US to resolve its crisis by establishing its hegemony militarily over strategic resources and markets.

Britain confronted a global challenge to its interests, particularly from its main rivals in Europe. Seeking to preserve its position against German and French dominance of the European Union, the British ruling elite saw its way forward as riding on the coattails of US military adventures.

The devastation of Iraq that they unleashed was a monstrous crime of imperialism, but appealing to the supposed basic humanity of the ruling elite will not resolve that, nor will it miraculously restabilise capitalism. However much Blair *should* be haunted by images of the Iraqi dead, there is no evidence that he is. A week before the broadcast, he was at a public meeting in Plymouth insisting that Britain must continue to be prepared to play a global military role alongside the US. Immediately following its broadcast, Britain’s senior representative in Iraq, Army Lt. Gen. Graeme Lamb, told reporters that British forces will remain in Iraq through 2007 and 2008 if necessary.

It is simply wrong to suggest that Blair might be brought to justice by Brown or the Democrats, who are committed to the same essential aims and policies for addressing the crisis of imperialism. Brown, as Beaton states, supported the war. And rather than offering any outlet for the mass antiwar sentiments, the Democrats have shown their continued commitment to securing US hegemony over oil resources even as the war against Iraq threatens to spill over into a wider war against Iran.

If the leaders of British and US imperialism are to be brought to justice for their crimes, this requires the development of a politically independent movement of the working class, not illusions in a return to “sanity” by the ruling class. Nevertheless, the criticisms emanating from Britain’s “opinion formers” are an indication that this is a very real possibility.



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