

Blair's legacy: Militarism abroad, social devastation at home

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

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On Thursday, Tony Blair announced the timetable for his departure as leader of the Labour Party and therefore as prime minister. He will not formally leave office until the end of June so as to enable the party to select his successor, which will almost certainly be Chancellor Gordon Brown.

Blair's announcement is probably the most long-awaited resignation in living memory. Ever since the 2005 general election there has been much talk that Blair's departure was imminent.

For a man who has made so much of the "hand of history" being on his shoulder and of his "legacy"—a word now being bandied about by Downing Street and the media—there was no good time to announce he would stand aside.

Even more detested in Britain than his mentor Margaret Thatcher—officially the most hated prime minister in recent history—opinion polls record that his legacy is one soaked in the blood of the preemptive war and occupation of Iraq. Some 50 percent of the population believe it is for this ignominious reason that Blair will find his place in the history books. The next highest numbers believe it will be due to his alliance with President George W. Bush.

Blair leaves office as an unindicted war criminal and the first sitting prime minister in history to be interviewed as part of a police investigation (the "cash for honours" scandal). It is no coincidence that Lord Levy had earlier announced that he would stand down as the prime minister's special Middle East envoy. In his capacity as Blair's chief fundraiser, Levy has been arrested and questioned under caution by police investigating the alleged sale of peerages in return for party loans.

The prime minister has reportedly been planning his retirement for some time in discussions with the likes of Rupert Murdoch and the then-chief executive of British Petroleum, Lord Browne. It has been suggested that out of concern that he not be seen to be cashing in too quickly, his first project will be to establish a global foundation to foster "greater understanding" between the three "Abrahamic faiths" of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

This is an obscene conceit in itself, considering his role in the Middle East. But no doubt Blair will once again be able to utilise his skills in soliciting donations from rich benefactors. His real money-making venture is expected to be speaking tours of the United States. Estimates as to what he can expect to earn in his first year out of office range between a conservative £5 million and £10 million, and a book deal is estimated to be worth between £5 million and £8 million.

There is no question that Blair will be feted in right-wing circles, especially in the US. This is first of all for his record of unbridled militarism in alliance with Washington. He is also valued in these circles because, just as in the US, his "war on terror" rhetoric has been

used to justify the most antidemocratic and authoritarian measures.

Just as importantly, his reputation has been built on the huge transfer of wealth from working people to the global financial corporations and the super-rich that he helped engineer in the UK.

Last month's *Sunday Times* Rich List recorded that the richest 1,000 people in Britain more than trebled their wealth under Blair. Their fortunes grew by 20 percent last year alone, to a combined £360 billion.

London has been described as a "magnet for billionaires," attracted by the UK's reputation as an "on-shore tax-haven" in which the wealthy—many of whom earned their fortunes through asset-stripping, privatization and financial speculation—pay next to nothing on their incomes.

In contrast, the number of people living in poverty in Britain last year rose from 12.1 million to 12.7 million, a rise of 600,000 people, whilst the number of poor children increased by 200,000 to 3.8 million between 2005 and 2006.

It is his role in enriching a small minority of the population that has also earned him kudos from Britain's media, including the nominally liberal press. The *Observer* editorialised April 29, "Britain is better off after a decade with Tony Blair in charge. Wealth has been created, and wealth has been redistributed. That is what Labour governments have always hoped to do. It has happened without a brake on global competitiveness."

To the extent that commentators have been forced to acknowledge Blair's role in Iraq, it is portrayed as a tragic and isolated mistake that mars an otherwise enviable record. This conceals the fact that Iraq is part of a resurgence of imperialist militarism that has included sending Britain to war in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, and which continues with the current provocations against Iran.

That the media should reduce Iraq to a mere detail is bad enough. That it does so in the aftermath of the devastating losses suffered by Labour in the elections on May 3—in which the war played a key role—is testament to the gulf between the ruling elite and their political apologists and the mass of working people.

The elections saw Labour lose control in Scotland for the first time in 50 years, and delivered the party its worst result in Wales since 1918. In England, where Labour was already at an unprecedented low, it was wiped out in 90 local authorities and lost almost 500 councillors. Overall, its share of the vote stands at just 27 percent, under conditions in which turnout never went much beyond 50 percent.

There has been much discussion on the elections revealing the extent to which the coalition that brought Blair to power in 1997—between Labour's traditional support in the major cities and

towns and a layer of former Conservative voters in marginal constituencies—has broken down.

Andrew Rawnsley in the *Observer* May 6 noted that “to non-tribal voters, his detachment from his party was always central to his electoral appeal. It was his ability to reach out to parts of the country not touched by previous Labour leaders that has kept him in Number 10 for such a remarkably long span.... Tony Blair has proved that an UnLabour prime minister leading a Labour government can be electorally very potent.”

Like Margaret Thatcher, Rawnsley continued, “he won by creating a coalition that gathered support from beyond his party’s core vote. Like her, his electoral triumphs at Westminster were accompanied by a hollowing-out of the party beyond it. And as with her, his coalition has eventually fractured.”

Rawnsley’s reference to the “hollowing-out” of Labour is telling, but it is one that he skips over and other commentators completely ignore. This is because, like much of the pro-Labour media, the *Observer* is involved in a concerted effort to rescue New Labour from oblivion under a Brown leadership. The lesson, Rawnsley continues, is that “the chancellor must remember that New Labour won power in the first place by appealing to affluent and aspirational middle-class voters.”

The excited chatter about New Labour’s “coalition” is bogus. In the final analysis, all parliamentary majorities depend on such combinations, including Labour’s landslide victory in 1945 that was secured on the basis of a programme of significant social reforms. In New Labour’s case, however, its electoral victory was built on the monumental fiction that it was possible to marry the concerns of working people with an unbridled big business agenda.

No amount of repackaging can conceal the fact that this perspective has been proven to be little more than a smokescreen behind which the rich have become even richer while the vast majority have been reduced to a precarious and debt-ridden existence.

The real pro-Blair coalition—the one that dare not speak its name—was between big business and the super-rich and the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

It was because of its past association with the working class that Labour was able to complete Thatcher’s abandonment of the welfare state model—the “mixed economy” of nationalised industries and public service provision—and, with it, all the gradualist notions that were essential to securing social peace in the postwar period.

The trade unions not only played an essential political role in fashioning New Labour’s right-wing agenda, but also in preventing any resistance to it, whilst the government cut public spending, held down wages and privatised health and educational provision.

Nothing epitomises the invidious character of the trade union bureaucracy more than its refusal to back the mass protests against the Iraq war, on the grounds that to do so would jeopardise a Labour government. Indeed, the fact that Blair can expect to make a graceful exit from Downing Street at a time of his own choosing, rather than being forced out of office as he deserves, is primarily the responsibility of the Trades Union Congress.

At the same time, the manner of Blair’s departure is eloquent testimony to the absence of any principled opposition to Blair within the Labour Party itself. He never faced a serious challenge on the left. Rather the party’s official left wing dwindled to a rump, while Blair’s inner coterie was staffed by a host of former “lefts”—many with a Stalinist pedigree.

Big business and the trade unions are now attempting to build

support for a continuation of this alliance under Brown. In an effort to salvage Labour, even the bitter hostilities between the Blair and Brown factions of the party have been temporarily set aside, with the chancellor’s succession to leadership more of a coronation than a contest.

The fundamental problem they face, however, is that Blair’s “success” was built on the corpse of the Labour Party. With big business having monopolised all the official parties, in the process transforming Labour into a neo-conservative rump, any possibility of social tensions finding safe release has also been eliminated.

Brown—the joint architect of New Labour—can no more turn back the clock than he can jump out of his own skin. Much of Brown’s claims to be setting out a different agenda to Blair’s are about presentation and securing the support of Parliament—something made necessary by Labour’s dwindling majority and the widespread belief that parliamentary democracy has been eviscerated by a sleazy, corrupt and unaccountable clique. Of the agenda of militarism and war, he has nothing to say other than an indication that he will allow Parliament a vote when a future war is declared.

There can be no return to the old political setup, when millions of workers looked to Labour as “their party.” It is a party of the financial oligarchy, bitterly hostile to any measures that encroach on the interests of capital and the rich—a fact made plain by the derision within its ranks at the prospect of a “left” leadership bid by Michael Meacher or John McDonnell. So antithetical is the Labour Party to even the tamest support for social reforms that it is questionable if the chosen “left” candidate will be able to muster the backing of 45 members of Parliament necessary to make such a bid.

The disenfranchising of the working class is a European and international phenomenon. Across the continent, the former social democratic parties have adopted the policies of the right. Their names are the only remaining vestiges of their origins as mass organisations of the working class, retained only in order to sow political confusion in an attempt to impose their deeply unpopular policies on a hostile electorate.

This presages enormous class and political conflicts. But, as recent elections here and in France and Germany have shown, if right-wing social democrats are not to be simply replaced by right-wing Conservatives, and social inequality and the dangers of new wars are to be overcome, workers and youth must establish their political independence from the bourgeoisie and its “left” appendages through the building of a genuine international socialist party.



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