

Blair leaves office and becomes Bush's "peace envoy":

Sycophancy in parliament and an insult to world opinion

By Socialist Equality Party of Britain
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The manner of Tony Blair's departure as prime minister says a great deal about both British and international politics.

Easily the most hated man in Britain, his last appearance in parliament at Prime Minister's Question Time became an occasion for wistful nostalgia, mutual backslapping and sycophancy. As Blair concluded his appearance with the declaration, "I wish everyone, friend or foe, well and that is that, the end." the House rose in a standing ovation.

Parliament has never witnessed anything like it. Even the Conservatives rose and applauded, led by party leader David Cameron who had earlier delivered a gushing tribute to the outgoing prime minister and his supposed achievements.

The display gave the lie to Blair's statement that he had "never stopped fearing" his appearances in parliament and his claim that "It is in that fear that respect is retained." As the *Guardian's* Simon Hoggart noted, in reality "they never laid a glove on him. MPs have, with rare exceptions, been the poodle's poodles."

In keeping with this, Blair's final turn before the assembled MPs underscored the degree to which virtually any pretence of party political differences has been abandoned—with the result that Britain now functions, for all practical purposes, as a one-party state.

This is not a recent development, but the culmination of political and social processes that began in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher. However, to understand just how complete the transformation of political life during Blair's term in office has been it is instructive to compare their respective departures from office.

Both have proved extraordinarily divisive figures, yet the manner of their leaving could not be more striking. Pushed out of office by popular hostility and a palace coup within her own party, Thatcher's last statement to the House—forced on her by a motion of no confidence—was replete with denunciations of socialism and dire warnings that Labour would return Britain to "conflict and confrontation" and reverse Tory privatisation of key services. Whilst her own party rose in her support, various Labour MPs denounced them as "hypocrites".

If no trace of ideological divisions greeted Blair's own departure from office, it is with good reason. Labour's response to the crisis of rule facing British capitalism—brought on by the deep unpopularity and divisions within the Conservative Party—was to undertake the final abandonment of its previous programme of

social reformism.

Blair's election as Labour leader in 1994 saw the proclamation of "New Labour" and the junking of Clause Four of the party's constitution on social ownership. Consequently, far from Labour's subsequent election victory in 1997 confirming Thatcher's warnings, Blair professed to be her disciple on economic issues and promised only greater consideration of social issues within the framework of a globally competitive market economy.

What was termed Labour's "Third Way", or sometimes as "Blairism", was in reality only a repackaging of Thatcherite orthodoxy. Labour's economic policies saw a continuation of deregulation, including freeing the Bank of England from central control and the extension of privatisation into education and the National Health Service. In addition, universal welfare provision was replaced by a system based on means-testing.

The net effect has been a historically unprecedented redistribution of wealth away from working people and into the coffers of the super-rich, with the richest 1,000 people in Britain more than trebling their wealth in the decade since Blair took office. As a result, the UK is now at the bottom of the table of developed countries in terms of social mobility, trailing even the United States. Last year Britain, for the first time, also overtook the US in hours worked.

There is nothing in Labour's economic programme with which the Tories disagree, hence Cameron's ongoing efforts to portray himself as Blair's natural heir and his declared aversion to party political disputes. Blair's successor Gordon Brown has similarly proclaimed that the "need for change cannot be met by the old politics so I will reach out beyond narrow party interest" and "build a government that uses all the talents" of "men and women of goodwill". He has already made overtures to the Liberal Democrats, offering Shirley Williams—one of the leaders of the now defunct Social Democratic Party, the right-wing breakaway from the Labour Party—an advisory post and inviting ex-party leader Paddy Ashdown to join his cabinet. Leading entrepreneur Alan Sugar has been appointed as a business adviser.

There is also essentially unity on Britain's foreign policy, despite the disaster in Iraq.

It is universally acknowledged that it is popular hostility to the Iraq war and the ongoing occupation that has forced Blair to leave office earlier than he would have wished. Yet, even in his final

speech, Blair felt able to defend his decision to join the US-led assault. And no one was in a position to attack him for it.

Brown and the vast majority of the Labour Party supported the war, as did the Conservatives. Both parties are keen to extricate themselves from the debacle produced in Iraq and its domestic consequences. But there are major constraints on their ability to do so.

At no point has criticism within ruling circles gone beyond complaints that Blair tied Britain's interests too closely to those of the United States and to the neo-conservatives within the Bush administration in particular. Many believe that a harder bargain should have been struck or that by maintaining a greater degree of diplomatic independence, Britain could have acted as a restraining influence on Washington. No one, however, has seriously proposed a rupture with the US. Instead, Britain has offered to assume greater responsibility in Afghanistan to compensate for a troop reduction in southern Iraq.

To go further would require the development of a bloc of European powers that could act as a counterweight to the US. But despite broad concerns within Berlin and Paris over how Washington has destabilised the Middle East, the prospect of a US defeat in Iraq alarms them even more.

This goes some way towards explaining why the degree of political disconnect on display in parliament's farewell to Blair was matched by the response within international circles.

Blair's final days in office were dominated by the efforts of the Bush administration to impose him on the Middle East quartet—the US, European Union, Russia and the United Nations—as its “peace” envoy. Blair's appointment to such a role is an act of cynical indifference; yet another calculated thumbing of the nose on the part of the major powers to popular opinion. Millions throughout the world view Blair as a war criminal for what he has done in Afghanistan and Iraq, his opposition to a cease-fire during Israel's attack last year on Lebanon, and his recent efforts to promote factional warfare amongst the Palestinians. His name is synonymous with the promotion of war in the Middle East on behalf of the Bush administration.

But it is precisely for this reason that the US advanced him as the replacement for former World Bank head James Wolfensohn. He is Washington's man, charged with furthering its efforts to establish hegemony over Middle Eastern oil supplies at whatever cost.

Everyone knows this. Russia was demonstratively against Blair's appointment, as was Germany, which was not even informed until the last moment. Yet after only a short delay, Blair was installed—to wreak further havoc and suffering on the peoples of the Middle East.

Several commentators expressed astonishment at the manner of Blair's departure from Number 10 and his new appointment. The *Guardian's* Jonathan Freedland noted that given Blair's “reputation is for ever tainted by the invasion of 2003” his “graceful exit” and “in a manner of his choosing” was “puzzling”.

“Is there a precedent for this?” he asked, noting that Britain's Anthony Eden did not survive the Suez Crisis in 1956, President Lyndon Johnson was “overwhelmed by his escalation of the Vietnam war” and the “Lebanon war of 1982 had a similar effect

on Menachem Begin”.

“There is a pattern here, and Blair does not fit it,” he continued, stating that his appointment as Middle East envoy “suggests he's pulled it off, winning instant rehabilitation, at least from the club of world leaders.”

Blair can continue to assume a position of political prominence because he is not in any real sense a British politician—something he confirmed by immediately stating that he would stand down as MP for Sedgefield.

Neither does his reliance on Bush make him—strictly-speaking—an American politician. More correctly, he is the political creature of a global financial oligarchy that dictates economic and social policy in the US, Britain and the world over—based exclusively on their own personal enrichment.

Blair's departure coincided with a study of 71 countries by the investment bank Merrill Lynch and consultancy firm Capgemini, recording how the world's 100,000 super-rich has been able to almost entirely remove itself from the rest of society. It found that last year the “globalisation of wealth creation” had seen the wealth of “high net worth individuals” rise by 11.4 percent—taking their total prosperity to \$37.2 trillion, more than 15 times the annual output of the UK economy.

This is a layer that is not simply uninterested in the situation facing the vast bulk of humanity—its own fortunes are predicated on its further impoverishment.

Political developments in the US and Britain in the past two decades had something of a pioneering character, in that the dominance of this narrow and fabulously rich layer was established fastest and most completely in these two countries. But the same development is unfolding throughout Europe and internationally. Its most significant impact has been a fundamental realignment of official politics to the right and the resulting disenfranchising of the mass of the population.

For years, Blair's eventual departure from office was held out as bringing with it the possibility of a change in course and a government more responsive to the views of the electorate. Instead, Blair's official depiction as an elder statesman and parliament's fawning on him have confirmed that—on the essential issues of imperialist aggression and social reaction—things continue as before. Consequently, the divorce between working people and the entire political establishment must bring with it an opposing political realignment within the working class—a realignment to the left that must be based on an anti-imperialist and socialist perspective.



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