

Bush-Brown summit: Tensions but no policy shift by Britain

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There is a scene in the film *Love Actually* when the newly elected Prime Minister played by Hugh Grant finally takes a stand against the president of the United States after repeatedly attempting to get him to change policy direction. The denouement takes place at a press conference, in which Grant makes a cringe-worthy defence of Britain as a “small country” but a “great one” before telling the president, “I fear that this has become a bad relationship...a friend who bullies us is no longer a friend.”

Director Richard Curtis was guilty of an embarrassing display of political wish-fulfilment, in which his saccharine and sanitised version of Tony Blair tells Bush where to get off and finally stands up for the national interest. Blair left office leaving such daydreams to gather dust. However, his replacement by Gordon Brown seemed to have brought out the Curtis in a host of British newspapers.

Brown’s two-day visit to the United States was his first meeting with President George W. Bush since succeeding Blair on June 27. Before it took place, there was unanimity across the political spectrum that the “special relationship” between Britain and the US must be maintained, but that Brown must nevertheless distance himself from Bush and strike out on a course towards swift troop withdrawal from Iraq.

Naturally, this would not mean a public spat with Bush—heaven forbid—but the pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* suggested, “Hopefully, in private at least, Mr Brown will make clear it is time to prepare an exit strategy.” The right-wing *Daily Mail* called for “some blunt talking” to heal the damage to Britain done by Blair’s “playing the poodle.”

It was left to the *Guardian* to give full rein to fantasies of an assertive Brown. Its July 30 leader spoke of “a very different British prime minister” who knew “There is little to be gained from bonding with a lame-duck president, especially one about to get lamer as the campaign for his successor gets under way in earnest in September.”

It attached great significance to Brown’s not using the term “war on terror” and noted previous expressions of differences with the US by Brown appointees—International Development Secretary Hilary Benn stating that “the concept of a war on terror had given strength to terrorists”; Foreign Affairs minister Mark Malloch Brown declaring that Britain and the US would no longer be “joined at the hip”; Foreign Office minister Douglas Alexander arguing “in Washington that multilateral action and soft power would be more important this century than unilateral military

action.”

The *Guardian* concluded that “Mr. Brown can only be looking over Mr Bush’s shoulder to the special relationship he will form with the next—and possibly Democrat—president. In this Camp David, the (cowboy) boot is on the other foot. Mr. Bush has much to gain and little to lose from bathing in the reflected glory of his latest British guest.”

There is, of course, no harm in reading the political smoke-signals. But they should be read correctly. And the *Guardian* never asks why—after four years in which Iraq has been revealed as the worst foreign policy disaster in recent history and under conditions where Bush is by all normal standards a “lame-duck president,” it is forced to do so rather than report a clear statement of opposition.

Yet they and other newspapers all point to the central issue at stake—Britain’s strategic relationship with the US: One on which it relies in order to punch above its weight on the world arena and in particular to face off the challenge of its major European rivals, Germany and France.

Brown himself was clear on the political constraints this placed on his desire to extricate Britain from Iraq.

Prior to his arrival, he wrote an opinion piece for the *Washington Post* and made other statements hailing the historic “partnership of purpose” between Britain and the US. Describing himself as an “Atlanticist,” he praised “our strongest bilateral relationship” as something he was determined to maintain. “This partnership of purpose matters now more than ever. For if in the last century we fought together to save the very idea of freedom from the totalitarian threat, in this generation we defend together the ideal of freedom against the terrorist threat,” he went on.

Stressing the need for a “battle of ideas” alongside “the battles that engage military might which we have been fighting together in Iraq and Afghanistan and through Nato” was all that could be interpreted as a difference of emphasis with Bush. But Blair too was fond of such remarks.

The *Sunday Times* had reported that Brown’s chief foreign policy aide, Simon McDonald, had been in Washington “doing the groundwork” by sounding out US foreign policy experts on a possible withdrawal of the 5,500 British troops still stationed in Iraq. But Brown’s spokesman Michael Ellam told the press that the prime minister would not unveil a plan to pull out British troops, and the UK’s approach toward Iraq was unchanged. “Simon McDonald made very clear at the meeting that the British Government’s position had not changed,” Ellam told reporters as

he travelled with Brown.

Britain has already begun winding down its troop presence in Iraq, but Brown has refused demands to set a date for the withdrawal of those that remain.

At his July 30 joint press conference with Bush at Camp David, the president's Maryland ranch, Brown said nothing that would contradict the Bush administration's position. He stated that Britain's "aim, like the United States is, step-by-step, to move control to the Iraqi authorities."

After noting that three of the four Iraqi provinces under British control have been transferred to the Iraqi government, he added, "We intend to move to overwatch in the fourth province." He then insisted that a scale-down or withdrawal of troops would only be made "on the military advice of our commanders on the ground"—a phrase that chimes in with rather than contradicts the position of Bush.

"We have duties to discharge and responsibilities to keep in support of the democratically elected government and in support of the explicit will of the international community," he said.

Brown had clearly agreed with Bush that nothing substantive would be said on withdrawal until at least mid-September when the US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, is set to deliver his assessment of Bush's "surge." Brown thus promised a "full statement to Parliament" on its return in October.

Bush gave every impression of being satisfied that—for the time being at least—Brown was still on-message. "So everyone's wondering whether or not the prime minister and I were able to find common ground, to get along, to have a meaningful discussion," he told the assembled press. "And the answer is 'Absolutely.'"

"There is no doubt in my mind that Gordon Brown understands that failure in Iraq would be a disaster for the security of our own countries," Bush said.

"He gets it," he added later.

Brown said he had told Bush it was "in Britain's national interest that, with all our energies, we work together to address all the great challenges that we face, also together."

He is aware that politically he cannot afford to maintain the close alliance Blair had with Bush and wants to develop broader ties, particularly with the Democrats but also with those Republicans who may replace him as party leader. Immediately after the press conference, Brown went to Capitol Hill for cross-party talks with leaders of the Senate and the House of Representatives, including the Democrats' Senate majority leader Harry Reid and House speaker Nancy Pelosi.

This only confirms that Britain is barely able to act independently regarding Iraq, or any other major foreign policy question. Like Blair, Brown knows that it is the US that ultimately calls the shots. He only hopes that someone else, other than Bush and the neo-cons, will decide what shots are to be fired and where. This leaves him in the difficult position of attempting to cultivate relations with the Democrats and to seek some change in direction in the Middle East, without unduly antagonising Bush in the immediate term.

It is a balancing act that cannot be sustained for very long. Bush has shown no intention of a withdrawal from Iraq before he is due

to leave office in January 2009. And the issuing of Gen. Petraeus's report is a lot closer to hand.

More decisive still is the question of possible hostilities against Iran, with many leading Republicans including Vice President Dick Cheney pushing hard for an attack on Tehran. Brown has again refused to rule out the possibility of a military strike.

Moreover, those that Brown might rely on as an alternative to Bush offer no real alternative. The Democrats are, like Labour, supportive of a scale-down of troops in Iraq to a sustainable level and a transfer of some of the freed-up forces to Afghanistan. But they absolutely do not want a complete withdrawal and have again and again refused to challenge Bush on Iraq. Expressed in this position is not merely political cowardice, but a common position with the Bush administration that a military defeat for the US in Iraq would be a disastrous blow to American imperialism's global authority.

It is for these reasons that the *Financial Times's* assessment of the Brown-Bush summit was more sober than most. The prime minister was attempting to make a "subtle recalibration of the special relationship, attempting to widen the focus from his relations with a neo-con president" and "build links across the political divide, in part to try to ensure good working relations with whoever succeeds Mr. Bush next year."

It continued that "none of this is intended as a snub to the White House. Mr. Brown stamped on suggestions from his newly appointed ministers that he wants any cooling in relations with the president. Whether he can successfully maintain this stance, while still building US ties that extend beyond the current Bush administration, remains to be seen."

Matthew Tempest also acknowledged in the *Guardian*, "The real test of where Mr. Brown stands will come...if the US strikes Iran."

In the cold light of (the following) day, the newspaper's editorial response to the summit was also more guarded. Whereas Brown secured "a working relationship, free of sycophancy" and pulled "the clothes over to Britain's side of the bed...[t]he reality in Iraq will not be finessed by cleverly worded answers at press conferences.

"The American command has already prepared a detailed plan to fight on for another two years. The only issue they face is how many troops they can withdraw in the process.... The US fear is that if Britain withdraws most of its remaining 5,500 troops from the south before that date, more US troops would be needed to protect supply lines to Kuwait. In Iraq, at least, the two nations will continue to act as if they are joined at the hip."



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