Britain: Brown reaffirms his pro-US credentials on Iran and Europe

Chris Marsden
20 November 2007

Key foreign policy announcements, advanced as proof of how Prime Minister Gordon Brown would articulate a new vision following the disaster suffered by Labour under Tony Blair due to Iraq, have only exposed the deep malaise affecting his government.

The prime minister has not only disappointed those within ruling circles and the media who wanted him to take a certain distance from Washington, but ended up fuelling factional divisions within his own cabinet.

This emerged in a speech Brown delivered to the Lord Mayor's Banquet at Mansion House last week. Amidst a series of banalities, Brown's most significant statements by far were his profession of loyalty to Washington, coupled with his call for harsh sanctions against Iran and a continued refusal to rule out military action.

Most of the rest was warmed-over Blairite rhetoric. For Brown, foreign policy was "hard-headed internationalism," necessitated by the interconnectedness of the world economy and politics—and the common threats posed by failed states and rogue states, terrorism, climate change, etc.—the same rhetoric Blair delivered regularly to justify the pursuit of Britain's imperial ambitions and interests.

Brown's apologists did what they could to maintain the illusion of a new direction. The *Independent* detected a new orientation towards Europe. The *Guardian* wrote of the "different international agendas" of Brown and Blair, but then pulled up short—adding after several paragraphs, "Actually, this is not such a different view of the world from the one that was always held by Mr. Blair." It even complained that the speech said "little new on subjects such as Iran, the Middle East or Pakistan" and "There was a disturbingly large hole in the speech where a European policy ought to have been."

Brown's statements on the US were meant for the ears of the Bush administration. "It is no secret that I am a life long admirer of America," he said. "I have no truck with anti-Americanism in Britain or elsewhere in Europe and I believe that our ties with America—founded on values we share—constitute our most important bilateral relationship."

Brown wanted a strengthening of the European Union and reform of the United Nations Security Council to include Japan, India, Brazil, Germany and some African countries. But these efforts to build a "multi-polar world," and to give the European powers a greater say in world affairs, were predicated on continued fealty to Washington. It is, he said, "good for Britain, for Europe and for the wider world that today France and Germany and the European Union are building stronger relationships with America. The 20th century showed that when Europe and America are distant from one another, instability is greater; when partners for progress the world is stronger."

Brown also sought to please the US on Iran, stating, "The greatest immediate challenge to non-proliferation is Iran's nuclear ambitions.... Iran has a choice—confrontation with the international community leading to a tightening of sanctions or, if it changes its approach and ends support for terrorism, a transformed relationship with the world."

If Tehran failed to satisfactorily demonstrate that it was not seeking to build nuclear weapons, he continued, "we will lead in seeking tougher sanctions both at the UN and in the European Union, including on oil and gas investment and the financial sector. Iran should be in no doubt about our seriousness of purpose."

There is little doubt that, in the best of all possible worlds, Brown would like the European powers to be able to act as a counterweight to the US and that he does not want the Pentagon, or its proxy in Israel, to unleash a military offensive against Iran. But he faces the same constraints as his predecessor Blair, who justified his own relations with the Bush administration by claiming that Britain was acting as a "bridge" between the US and Europe, and that by supporting Washington on Afghanistan and Iraq he could act as a restraining influence and ensure that America continued to work through multilateral institutions such as the UN.

Brown today says nothing different to this—and cannot really do so.

The US has been gravely undermined by Iraq, but so too has Britain. America's economy is also much weakened, which strengthens the hand of Europe. But Europe's response is to seek a more favourable foreign policy relationship with Washington, not to directly challenge the US.

Brown might choose to hail the recent overtures to the US by France's Nicolas Sarkozy and Germany's Angela Merkel, but in reality he will fear being replaced as America's main European ally—a position that has been used by London to punch above its weight against its continental rivals.

Strains in the not-so special relationship were already apparent over Brown's decision to scale back Britain's troop presence in Iraq and led to open criticism of the British Army by top Bush advisers. The statement by his minister, Lord Malloch Brown, that Britain would no longer be "joined at the hip" with Washington as it was under Blair was a source of bitter recriminations, for which Brown has been trying to make amends ever since.

There is also frustration in Washington over Brown's refusal to nail his colours to the mast over the use of military force against Iran and his constant resort to the vague phrase, "I do not rule out anything."

The pro-Conservative *Sunday Telegraph* was used by "Allies of Condoleezza Rice, the US Secretary of State" to vent their frustrations publicly on the day before Brown's speech. They told the *Telegraph* "that the Prime Minister should emulate France's President Nicolas

© World Socialist Web Site

Sarkozy and warn that Iran may face military action, in order to help avert a new war in the Middle East.

"The concerns reflect growing irritation in Washington, from the White House down, that Mr. Brown will not match his more robust private conversations on Iran with hard-hitting public statements that would put pressure on the Teheran regime....

"White House officials have accused him of double-talk for offering support in private then sanctioning senior ministers to distance themselves from the Bush administration in public.... In stark contrast, Mr Sarkozy has made clear that war will come."

Concerning the possible impact of a thaw in relations between Paris and Washington, Nile Gardner, the former adviser to Margaret Thatcher now at the Heritage Foundation, told the *Telegraph*, "Britain is clearly losing influence in Washington after Tony Blair. Brown is the invisible man in terms of his profile here. It should be of concern in London that France is muscling in on traditional British territory."

It was clearly with this in mind that Brown decided to rewrite the speech delivered by his Foreign Secretary David Miliband on the European Union.

In a speech at the College of Bruges on November 15, Miliband was to urge the build-up of continental defence capabilities. Europe was at "a fork in the road" and could fall into disorder if it rejected the use of economic influence and military intervention abroad. But Brown intervened personally to remove what he viewed as passages that were too pro-European only hours before Miliband was due to speak.

The *Times* reported that Brown had ordered Miliband to drop explicit references to an "EU military capabilities charter," identifying targets for investment, research and training that would have echoed proposals made by Sarkozy.

References to Europe's "ability to set standards for the rest of the world" were removed and the statement that Europe could become a "model power" was changed to a "model regional power."

Newspapers had also been briefed that Miliband was to propose an extension of the European single market to North Africa and the Middle East by 2030. This ambition was downgraded to a free-trade zone for "the countries of the Maghreb."

In the end, the speech, far from being an assertion of a new orientation towards Europe, came over as being a lineal descendent of the Eurosceptic pronunciations of Margaret Thatcher at the same venue in 1988, which he even began by citing.

"There is only one superpower in the world today—the United States," he said. "There may be others on the horizon, such as China and India, but the US has enormous economic, social cultural and military strength."

In contrast, "The EU is not and never will be a superpower" and was "never going to have the fleetness of foot or the fiscal base to dominate. In fact economically and demographically Europe will be less important in the world of 2050 that it was in the world of 1950."

The *Times* report on the incident paints a vivid picture of the degree to which the UK is dependent on the US, noting that "On David Miliband's desk at the Foreign Office are two telephones. One is a standard model, which he uses to call home to get regular updates from his wife on their newly adopted baby boy.

"The other—known as 'Brent'—is a secure line. It has two speed dials. The first goes straight to Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state (although the button is still marked with the name of Colin Powell, her predecessor); the second goes direct to No 10."

On this occasion, Miliband's two masters spoke with one voice to overrule him.

The *Observer* was moved to the write between Downing Street and the Foreign Office, which stretches back to the appointment of the outspoken Lord Malloch Brown as a senior minister."

"Friends of Miliband, who is not a member of the Brown 'inner circle,' say that Miliband is increasingly disaffected," it continued.

Blair and his supporters have sought to capitalise on Brown's difficulties.

Blair visited Miliband's South Shields constituency last week, where a local reporter asked him whether Miliband would be his heir. Blair asked Miliband, "Shall I answer that?" He then told the journalist, "I'm very proud of him. It's a great achievement to become Foreign Secretary, but it's down to David to decide that."

Coming after Brown's humiliating decision to call off a general election in which he feared suffering heavy losses, the latest spat will inevitably deepen the infighting within the party.

The media responded to Brown's speech by speculating as to how close Britain was to being forced into siding with a US war on Iran. On the political front, with the Conservatives competing with Labour to demonstrate their hard-line stance on Iran, this again found only minimal expression. The Liberal Democrat leadership challenger, Nick Clegg, wrote to Brown warning him against Britain "sleepwalking" into a conflict with Iran and called on him to rule out supporting military action by the US.

"As President Bush nears the end of his term in office, it is essential that his administration is left in no doubt that a last-minute dash towards unilateral military action will not be supported by Britain," Clegg wrote. He noted that "The rumble of war with Iraq started with similar sabre-rattling from President Bush," and it appeared that Brown was ready to give "a blank cheque" to Bush once again to pursue an aggressive policy "with no sense of independent British foreign policy priorities."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site