

# Britain: As Basra burns, Iraq inquiry call supported by just 12 Labour MPs

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As Iraq's puppet army launched its bloody assault on Basra on March 25, Britain's parliament once again rejected an inquiry into the Iraq war.

The motion, tabled by the Conservative Party, was supported by the Liberal Democrats. But the Brown government won the day comfortably. The motion—for an entirely circumscribed inquiry to be conducted in secret by the Privy Council—was defeated by 299 to 271 votes.

Demonstrating once more the absence of any significant or principled opposition to militarism within the government, just 12 Labour MPs broke ranks to support the inquiry call. A government amendment, acknowledging the need for an inquiry but only after “important operations” in Iraq end, was then passed by 299 to 259 votes.

Little was said during the debate regarding the offensive just then being launched by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government in the southern city of Basra. With US support, tens of thousands of Iraqi troops were initiating Saulat al-Fursan (Charge of the Knights)—a major military campaign against militias loyal to Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr.

Despite this silence, the mounting concern over the Iraq quagmire within ruling circles was evident.

In 2003, William Hague—now Conservative foreign secretary—had accused those opposed to war of “appeasement” and endorsed then-Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to back the US, despite massive popular opposition, describing it as “absolutely in the interests of this country and the wider world.” In parliament last week, Hague defended his support for the war but argued it was now “vital” to learn all “possible lessons” from the invasion and its aftermath. Clearly motivated by the failure of British and US forces to establish a swift and successful occupation over the country and its oil resources, Hague said that it was time to convene an immediate inquiry into the origins and conduct of the war.

Hague made clear that the purpose of the inquiry would not be to hold anyone to account for the human catastrophe created in Iraq, nor the flagrant abuse of democratic accountability that accompanied it. He warned rather that the credibility of future military actions had been jeopardised by events in Iraq. “The passage of time, the urgent need to learn for the future, the need to reinforce the credibility of future decision-taking and the diminished role in Iraq of British forces” all pointed to the need for an inquiry, he said.

Writing in the *Guardian* prior to the vote, Hague cited the “poor co-ordination and lack of expertise” that had surrounded the invasion and warned that this had implications beyond Iraq.

“At this very moment in Afghanistan, we and our allies are struggling with somewhat different but nonetheless parallel problems of the co-ordination of both military and economic efforts in a vast and sometimes hostile land,” he wrote. “The need to learn the lessons of Iraq in terms of how government should function and countries should be rebuilt is transparently urgent. So too is the need to have studied, to the satisfaction of the British people, the actual origins of the war. For until that is done, any British government setting out to explain to parliament and people that military action is necessary to deal with a threat it believes to be serious will face a wall of scepticism and disbelief.”

Former Conservative Foreign Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind reiterated the need for Privy Council inquiry, pointing to the “inadequacy of the Government's preparation for one of the worst conflicts that any British Government has been responsible for in the last 100 years.” Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman Ed Davey said, “Frankly one would have thought that an inquiry ought to be automatic when a decision of the magnitude of going to war goes so catastrophically wrong. To put such an inquiry off, even five years

afterwards, is nothing short of a scandal.”

Again and again, the word’s “Iraq” and “catastrophe” appeared together.

Referring to the current military campaign, the *Independent* complained, “When British troops handed over power in the province of Basra to the Iraqi government in December, we were told that the withdrawal was confirmation of the growing stability in the south of the country. Now we see just what nonsense that was.

“Our own government might have managed to see off last night’s attempt in the House of Commons to force an immediate public inquiry into the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But, as Basra burns and yet another fanciful claim of progress in the country disintegrates, the charge sheet against those who embroiled us in this catastrophe grows still longer.”

In an attempt to assuage public hostility over the Iraq war, on his succession to Labour leadership, Brown pledged to reduce the number of British troops in Iraq from 4,100 to 2,500 by May of this year. Even before the latest offensive in Basra and Baghdad, that proposal was being quietly shelved. In February, the *Observer* had forecast that a “final all-out battle for Basra” was “inevitable.” It cited Colonel Richard Iron, military adviser to Iraqi Commander General Mohan, stating that plans for further troop withdrawals were “optimistic” given that the Iraqi Security Force was preparing for “confrontation” in Basra.

The military “confrontation” now underway in Basra, its surrounding areas and parts of Baghdad, was thus in preparation for some time with Britain’s full knowledge. Yet, for the last week, the government and the media have claimed that no British forces are involved in the “Charge of the Knights.” And, unlike President George W. Bush, Brown did not rush to give his support to Maliki’s actions, so as to maintain the fiction that Britain is no longer seriously “engaged” in the occupation.

Given that Britain took responsibility for policing southern Iraq—the main oil-producing centre—at the time of the invasion, this is not credible. Moreover, the claim that British troops remained in their barracks near to Basra airport while US and Iraqi troops battled with Sadr’s supporters led some political commentators to question the point of maintaining any forces in the country.

In the last days, the story began to shift. British assistance was limited to providing “logistical help and air support” to the Iraqi forces, it was said. On Saturday,

the *Telegraph* admitted that British forces were “directly involved for the first time in the battle to stamp out militias from the Iraqi city of Basra, engaging suspected Mehdi Army positions with artillery.”

The newspaper continued, “Military analysts estimate that three British battlegroups—each of about 650 men armed with Challenger 2 tanks and Warrior armoured vehicles—are on hand to re-enter the city,” citing one unnamed British official complaining, “It’s ridiculous for Britain’s position in Iraq that we’ve got this firepower down there and we’re not willing to help the Iraqis out.”

The government is caught in a bind—wanting to relegate Iraq to the political sidelines, while acutely aware that the interests of British capital depend on eradicating and containing all opposition to the imposition of foreign dictates.

Prior to the parliamentary vote, Brown had pledged that an inquiry would be convened but argued that it would be inappropriate to hold one now, as the situation in Iraq remained “fragile.” Foreign Secretary David Miliband, in an oblique reference to the Maliki offensive, argued that the dispute between the Conservative and Labour parties “does not concern substance but timing,” warning that “the mission has not yet been accomplished.”

In holding this line, Brown could count on the overwhelming support of his own party. The Conservatives had sought to court a rebellion amongst Labour MPs, calculating that the limited character of their proposed inquiry, and a desire to retain some public credibility, would convince a sufficient number of backbenchers to back their demand. In the end, even fewer Labour MPs were prepared to defy the government over Iraq than the 19 who voted against its plan to close Post Offices.



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