

Britain: Brown assures Bush more troops for Afghanistan, no Iraq withdrawal

Paul Mitchell
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At a joint press conference with US President George Bush yesterday, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced that more troops would be sent to Afghanistan, taking the UK's contingent in the country to its "highest level."

After speculation in the media of a rift between London and Washington over troop deployments in Iraq, he added that there was no "timetable" for a withdrawal from the country. Britain has 4,200 troops remaining in Iraq on the outskirts of Basra and took part in the US-Iraqi offensive in late March against Shiite militiamen in the city. He also supported Bush in pledging that tougher sanctions will be imposed on Iran for failing to stop its nuclear energy programme.

Defence Secretary Des Browne later told parliament that a further 230 soldiers will be sent to Afghanistan, taking the total to around 8,030 by early 2009.

Sunday's *Observer* newspaper had claimed that Bush had delivered a "stern message" to Brown last week, warning about further reductions of British forces in Iraq. The White House moved to defuse the issue by saying, "What the president said is what the president has been saying and Prime Minister Brown has been saying from the very beginning." Downing Street declared that it was not British policy to set "arbitrary timetables" on troop withdrawal.

At their press conference Bush said, "I have no problem with how Gordon Brown is dealing with Iraq. He's been a good partner."

He continued, "I just want to remind you that [Brown] has left more troops in Iraq than he initially anticipated. Like me, he will be making his decisions based on the conditions on the ground without an artificial timetable based on politics."

He warmly welcomed Brown's pledge to send more troops to Afghanistan and to step up sanctions against Iran, praising him for being "tough on terror."

In relation to Iraq and Afghanistan, Brown said, "There is still work to be done and Britain plays, and will continue to play, its part." He praised Bush as a "true friend of Britain" and for the "steadfast resolution that he has shown in rooting out terrorism in all parts of the world."

On Iran, Brown stated, "I will repeat that we will take any necessary action so that Iran is aware of the choice it has to make—to start to play its part as a full and respected member of the international community, or face further isolation."

Britain would urge Europe to impose "further sanctions" on Iran, he said, by freezing the assets of the country's biggest bank and imposing new sanctions on oil and gas.

Bush thanked Brown for his "strong statement," and added, "The Iranians must understand that when we come together and speak with one voice we are serious." Pressure was necessary to "solve this problem diplomatically," but "Iranians must understand, however, that all options are on the table," he threatened.

Brown's pronouncements gave Bush everything he wanted. They were a kick in the teeth to those in the ruling elite and sections of the press who hoped that Brown's elevation to prime minister would signal an end to Tony Blair's "mistake" of aligning Britain too closely with the US.

Brown's craven support for Bush reveals that far more was involved than a policy error on Blair's part. Both men represent the dominant financial elite, whose central aim is utilise relations with Washington to project a global military and economic presence for British imperialism, while strengthening its hand against its major European rivals, Germany and France. And even though things have gone badly, there is little sign that anyone has an alternative perspective to offer within ruling circles, least of all Brown himself.

Brown's pronouncements only highlighted the impotence of the perspective promulgated by the Stop the War Coalition (StWC), which helped organise an anti-Bush demonstration on Sunday in tandem with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the British Muslim Initiative. Originally banned from assembling in Parliament at midday, the police finally allowed it to take place in the early evening but continued to refuse it permission to march the few hundred yards to Downing Street where Brown was entertaining Bush.

The StWC was the main beneficiary of the mass movement against the Iraq war and the widespread sentiment it provoked amongst working people for a political alternative to Labour. A key role was played by the Socialist Workers Party, which insisted that there was no possibility of the struggle against war being conducted on the basis of socialism. It had to formulate demands that could be supported by everyone, including a handful of Labour rebels and trade union functionaries, Liberal Democrats, nationalist parties, dissident Conservatives and the coalition's other major affiliates, CND and the Muslim Association of Britain—a small group of Arab Islamists that portrayed the Iraq war in religious terms.

As Blair's hold on power became increasingly untenable the StWC sold the idea that Brown, then his chancellor, would break from policies that he had fully supported. A letter was drafted by Communist Party of Britain leader Andrew Murray and StWC convenor and SWP leader Lindsey German that whilst acknowledging that "Brown has been at the Prime Minister's right hand throughout the decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan" claimed, "Nevertheless, it is our conviction that mass pressure, combined with electoral self-interest, can force the British government to break from George Bush's wars."

The interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were described as "Bush's wars" in order to provide a retroactive amnesty for all those Labourites who had voted in favour of war alongside Blair and Brown.

The Sunday demonstration also saw the antiwar MP George Galloway using his opportunity to sow dangerous illusions in Democratic presidential contender Barack Obama. He repeated statements he made earlier in the month on Arab TV when he said, "I pray for the safety of Barack Obama, and I pray that he can shift the United States' attitude. So as we come towards the November elections, and the real prospect of a significant victory for Obama, everyone will have to re-find their footing, and these puppet presidents and corrupt kings [in the Middle

East] may discover that the ground has moved under their feet, Allah willing."

Earlier this year Galloway declared, "My guess is America is looking for real change, and only Barack Obama represents that."

Obama seeks to portray himself as an opponent of the Iraq war, but has repeatedly rejected what he describes as a "precipitous withdrawal" of troops—Bush's "artificial timetable"—stating that he "has always believed that our troops need to be withdrawn responsibly" and that troops involved in "counterterrorism" operations would stay. In practice this means maintaining the occupation indefinitely.

In his June 4 speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, while repeating his support for diplomatic engagement with Iran, he said, "I will always keep the threat of military action on the table to defend our security and our ally Israel."

Obama represents a section of the American ruling elite that has concluded that a significant change in stance and personnel is required to salvage the interests of US imperialism in the Middle East and internationally. These layers do not oppose military action as such, but regard the Bush administration's single-minded focus on winning a military victory in Iraq as unwise and ultimately disastrous. An Obama presidency would not represent a fundamental break with the politics of American imperialism, but rather its continuation in a new form.

The attempt to prevent and curtail a peaceful antiwar protest is made necessary by the absence of any democratic mandate for the policies pursued by Brown and Blair before him. It led to open conflict between a massive number of police and some protesters, resulting in 25 arrests and some serious injuries. Two rows of barriers were erected to prevent access to Whitehall, together with rows of police officers and riot vans.



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