

Cameron negotiates BP-Libya minefield in Washington

Julie Hyland
22 July 2010

Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's first official visit to Washington was trailed in the British media as signalling a more "pragmatic" approach to the transatlantic "special relationship."

In place of the Labour government's "deferential" and "needy" approach, Cameron would be "hard-headed and realistic." While acknowledging Britain's role as the "junior partner," the Conservative leader pledged to be a "self-confident ally."

"The alliance is not sustained by our historical ties or blind loyalty," Cameron wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*. "This is a partnership of choice that serves our national interests."

Cameron's claim to have adopted a more "realistic" approach was shaped by domestic considerations. Widespread public hostility to UK involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is one factor. More important for the Tory leader, however, is the apoplexy within his own party, a significant section of the British political establishment and the City of London over the continuing fallout from the BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

The fact that BP's criminal negligence resulted in the deaths of 11 oil workers, has caused untold environmental damage that will impact for decades to come, and has destroyed the livelihoods of tens of thousands of workers counts for nothing amongst these layers. What concerns them is that even the minimal efforts by President Barack Obama to placate public outrage over the oil spill could jeopardise the lucrative profits of a leading British-based company.

With BP holding almost half of the UK's equity income funds, any suggestion that the oil giant should be made to account for the disaster it has created is anathema.

Even while oil was still pouring into the Gulf, Norman Tebbit, a cabinet minister under Margaret Thatcher, complained that Obama's reference to "British Petroleum," BP's former name, was "xenophobic." The *Financial Times* had similarly condemned "vituperative statements" from the White House aimed at "ratcheting up of the pressure" on BP.

Tensions were raised still further by renewed questioning of the Scottish authorities' decision last year to release Abdul Baset Ali al-Megrahi, the Libyan convicted for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 that killed 270 people, mainly

US citizens.

Megrahi, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer and given just three months to live, was returned to Libya last August on "compassionate" grounds. He is still alive. Now, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee has said it will investigate whether Megrahi's release was a quid pro quo for BP winning extensive drilling rights in Libya.

As Cameron set off for Washington, it was revealed that the committee had scheduled hearings beginning July 29 into the allegations, and that it could request representatives of the UK government and BP to appear.

This brought a furious response from Christopher Meyer, former British ambassador to the US. Writing in the *Daily Mail*, he complained that BP's share values "have halved since the explosion on its oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico in April." He added, "Predators have begun to circle the company."

The Senate hearings had "opened a new front" against the oil giant, he continued, the combined effect of which "could make it impossible for BP to continue to do business in the US."

Meyer acknowledged BP's responsibility "for an economic and ecological disaster" and its "poor" safety record. Naturally, it should pay compensation, he continued, and Cameron should "express the deepest sympathy" for those affected. "But", he wrote, "there comes a moment when justifiable retribution for the oil spill becomes persecution—and that moment has been reached."

He continued: "There would, I believe, be a ferocious outcry in Britain, and a crisis in British/American relations on a scale not seen since the Suez debacle of 1956, if BP, weakened by repeated attack from Capitol Hill, were snatched up at a bargain-basement price by Russian, Chinese or even American competitors."

Meyer and others have every reason to be alarmed by a probe into Megrahi's release. Not only does it threaten to open up a particularly cynical and sordid episode in the efforts of British imperialism to secure its geo-political interests. It holds the danger of again revealing the degree to which Britain's political elite is in hock to big business and the financial oligarchy.

The supposedly "humanitarian" considerations given for Megrahi's release at the time were entirely bogus. It is a matter

of record that in 2007, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair helped broker a “deal in the desert” with Libyan leader Colonel Gadhaffi that was worth billions in exploration rights for BP and a number of other companies.

The deal stalled over discussions between Britain and Libya on a prisoner transfer agreement. BP has admitted that it did lobby the British government to speed up the transfer arrangement, but denies Megrahi was ever the subject. That claim is made spurious by the fact that just six weeks after the UK government agreed Megrahi would be included in the agreement, BP secured a £15 billion oil and gas exploration deal in Libya.

Amongst those who could be questioned by the Senate committee is Sir Mark Allen, described as “BP’s Lawrence of Arabia.” Allen’s involvement in the Libyan deal not only confirms the intimate links between the British state and the major corporations, it also threatens to expose the mercenary interests behind the so-called “war on terror” and the bloody colonial invasions conducted under its guise.

Allen was previously the head of MI6’s counter-terrorism unit, in which role he is reported to have conducted the secret talks with the Libyan regime aimed at ending the country’s “diplomatic isolation.” This was in 2003—the same year that Washington and London began their invasion of Iraq.

In March 2004, Blair met with Gadhaffi on the outskirts of Tripoli. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, “little more than a year after US and British forces invaded Iraq and toppled the Hussein regime, the image of Blair shaking hands with Gadhaffi—until recently a fervent advocate of terror against the West and the self-confessed author of the most deadly terrorist attack ever to occur in Europe, the 1988 bombing of an American Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland—was beamed around the world.”

It continued, “Notwithstanding the invocations of humanitarian concern for the Iraqi people and other rhetoric associated with the so-called ‘war on terror,’ Iraq was conquered so that the US could establish its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East. Libya is now being courted out of the same essential considerations.”

Exploration rights for British and American companies saw Libya’s repackaging as a “partner for peace.” Shortly after he was knighted for his services in 2005, Allen left MI6 and became a special adviser to BP.

As for Blair, only last weekend the *Daily Mail* revealed that the former prime minister had flown for secret talks with Gadhaffi in June, just days after he had denied that he had any “formal or informal,” “paid or unpaid” relations with the Libyan leader.

Citing a “senior Libyan government” source, the *Mail* claimed that Blair had supplied “a great deal of invaluable advice” to the Libyan leader. This included matters concerning “lucrative investment opportunities,” the newspaper continued, noting that Blair has earned millions since leaving office

advising major firms “about investment opportunities in Libya.”

That some amongst the US bourgeoisie now chafe against having to share the spoils of diplomacy in Libya with their junior ally cannot be ruled out. As the WSWs article cited above noted presciently regarding British deals with Gadhaffi, “London may have stolen a march on its European rivals, but the Bush administration will demand the lion’s share of Libyan oil contracts as payback for its billion-dollar investment in the Iraq war.”

This was the political minefield that Cameron had to negotiate during his visit. On the one hand, he sought to disavow any responsibility for BP—“I have no idea what BP did, I am not responsible for BP” he said—and for Megrahi’s release, which he described as a “terrible mistake.”

But he insisted, “It was to both countries’ advantage for BP to remain a strong and stable company,” and he rejected demands for a full inquiry into the Libyan’s transfer, conceding only that he would ask the cabinet secretary to determine whether any “further relevant papers” concerning the matter should be published.

That Cameron could attempt his balancing act was due to the backing he received from the Obama administration, which is equally anxious not to do anything that could jeopardise US corporate interests. For all the “blood for oil” rhetoric emanating from some Democrats on the Foreign Relations Committee, the US bourgeoisie is just as mired in corruption and self-interest as its British counterpart.

Cameron’s visit only underscored the fact that—notwithstanding the tensions between them—Washington and London remain partners in crime. Not only in Libya—where more than 50 US energy companies have signed lucrative contracts—but in Afghanistan, where both leaders agreed to “reinvigorate” their “counterinsurgency” efforts, while making renewed threats against Iran.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact