

British Parliament overwhelmingly endorses war

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The entire British political establishment has endorsed the air war against Libya. On Monday evening, Parliament voted almost unanimously for a motion supporting the use of UK military forces and welcoming the United Nations Security Council resolution that provided the legal fig leaf for the neo-colonial war of aggression led by the US, Britain and France.

MPs from the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government were supported by the opposition Labour Party. The motion passed by a majority of 544, with only 15 MPs voting against. The 15 who voted no include nine Labour Party MPs, two members of the Northern Ireland-based Social Democratic Labour Party, one Conservative MP, and Caroline Lucas, the sole Green Party MP. Two “tellers,” Labour MPs, also voted against.

Constitutionally, the authorisation of military action requires only a decision by the prime minister. Parliament has no formal role in the deployment of UK forces. Nevertheless, Prime Minister David Cameron agreed to hold the vote, knowing that his decision to launch military action would receive overwhelming support, including from the Labour Party.

Nearly all the 50 MPs who spoke in the debate did so to endorse the military assault. The vote in favour was far higher than the parliamentary endorsement of the invasion of Iraq. No vote was held in Parliament on the invasion of Afghanistan.

The lopsided yes vote came despite an opinion poll showing that 53 percent of British people surveyed opposed the military intervention. Only one third approved.

The motion declared its support for the “taking of all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in Libya and to enforce the no-fly zone, including the use of UK armed forces and military assets in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973.”

Even as cruise missiles and bombs rained down on the Libyan people on the third day of the onslaught, the motion stated that Parliament “deplores the ongoing use of violence by the Libyan regime.”

The Liberal Democrats fought both the 2005 and 2010 general elections on the basis that they had voted against the war in Iraq in 2003. At the 2 million-strong London demonstration against the Iraq war in 2003, the Liberal Democrats were given pride of place on the platform by the Socialist Workers Party-led Stop the War Coalition, with then-leader Charles Kennedy speaking.

The Liberal Democrats did not oppose the war on a principled basis. Rather, they made support for the invasion contingent on the

passage of a second UN Security Council resolution specifically authorising military action. The attempt by the US and Britain to secure such a resolution was blocked by France. As soon as the war began, the Liberal Democrats declared their support for the British armed forces.

Some in Monday’s parliamentary debate felt obliged to reference the previous close relations between the British government and the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. Since former Prime Minister Tony Blair’s 2004 “deal in the desert,” government ministers, oil and other corporate executives, leading university officials and academics, and even members of the royal family lined up to ingratiate themselves with Gaddafi. In return, British corporations secured lucrative contracts and universities received generous Libyan grants.

The repression by the Libyan government against the recent protests was carried out with arms sold to Gaddafi by the British government. Last year, the UK issued more than £200 million worth of arms exports licences to Libya.

Labour leader Ed Miliband noted in passing his concerns over the fact that no action was being taken by the UK against state repression in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, and then declared his agreement with Cameron, arguing that the inability to do everything does not mean you should do nothing. Government is a mixture of “principle and pragmatism,” he said.

The vote demonstrated the virtual disappearance of the Labour Party “anti-war left.” The pro-forma “no” vote by a handful of MPs was registered not on the basis of any principled opposition, but rather in the form of a polite note of caution to the political and military establishment.

Two Labour “lefts”—Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell—proposed an amendment to the government’s motion stating that “every peaceful attempt must be made at conflict resolution under the auspices of the United Nations, and directly involving other Arab nations, before and during any deployment of armed force; commits the government to ensuring that, if conflict takes place, every effort is also made to protect civilians from harm, including the avoidance of the use of depleted uranium ordnance and cluster munitions.”

This piece of sophistry, which did not actually oppose the use of military force, was put forward under conditions where the war had already been under way for three days with the full support of the United Nations and “other Arab nations.”

Such was the timidity and deference of the nominal opponents

that Cameron was able to state, “There is much in the amendment that I welcome.”

One of the Labour MPs voting against was Barry Gardiner. He supported the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Three days earlier, he had stated, “I welcome the UN resolution but I oppose Britain’s military involvement in implementing it.”

He voted no on the grounds that the war was not in the British national interest. “North Africa is not on our borders,” he declared. “It is not in our direct sphere of influence. Libya poses no direct threat to the UK, and we have no historical responsibility as the former colonial power, so why are we spending millions of pounds on cruise missiles and endangering the lives of British soldiers to implement the resolution?”

Gardiner merely exposed his ignorance of history. From 1943 to 1951, the provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were, in fact, under British administration, while the French controlled Fezzan. By his twisted logic, moreover, if Italy had led the bombing and taken up the legacy of Mussolini by slaughtering Libya’s people, he could have happily signed off on the war.

The “no” vote by Green MP Lucas was just as duplicitous. In a March 11 statement, the Greens called for Parliament to be granted powers to “make a democratic decision on any military move against Colonel Gaddafi’s forces in Libya.” At the same time, the statement all but openly lined up with the government, declaring, “We are not ruling out support for a no-fly zone, but it would need to be very carefully handled and would need the support of countries in the region.”

In her statement to Parliament, Lucas did not oppose the military onslaught in Libya, stating only that she hoped Cameron “would agree that any military action needs to be principled and consistent.” She added, “Does he not agree that our position would be a lot more consistent and a lot more principled if we stopped selling arms to repressive regimes anywhere in that region?”

In his obsequious pledge of support to Cameron, Labour leader Miliband concluded with his oft-repeated reference to his “two Jewish parents whose lives were changed forever by the darkness of the holocaust, yet who found security in Britain.” He said his parents survived, “but many of my parents’ relatives were out of the reach of the international community and perished as a result.”

Miliband’s attempt to equate an imperialist war against a virtually defenceless former colony with opposition to Nazism and the holocaust represents a grotesque falsification of history. The true parallels with the actions of Hitler are not those of Gaddafi, but Cameron.

In a Reichstag speech in February 1938, Hitler declared himself the protector of “oppressed Germans” on the Third Reich’s borders. It was under the guise of securing “self-determination” for the German populations that the Nazis implemented their plan for *Lebensraum*—“living room in the east.” Czechoslovakia was invaded on the pretext of defending the Sudeten Germans, just as much of Tripoli and the rest of Libya are being ravaged on the pretext of defending Libyan civilians.

The implications of Labour’s enthusiastic support for the war against Libya go beyond the fate of one country. Jack Straw, the former Labour foreign secretary and accomplice in war crimes in Iraq, stated that the UN resolution against Libya was “historically

significant not just on its own terms.” He noted that “this is first occasion on which the Security Council has acted decisively upon the words relating to the responsibility to protect, which were agreed in the UN General Assembly in 2005 and in Security Council resolution 1674 in 2006.”

This so-called “responsibility to protect” amounts to a *carte blanche* for the imperialist powers to invade and plunder in any part of the world.

Every MP in the House of Commons knew that the pretext for military action in Libya was a lie, yet not a single voice was raised to directly challenge its criminal character.

On Sunday, Defence Secretary Liam Fox stated publicly that Libyan leader Gaddafi was a “legitimate target” of the bombings. Gaddafi’s targeted assassination would “potentially be a possibility,” he said. Foreign Secretary William Hague also suggested that Gaddafi could be targeted.

Philippe Sands, professor of law at University College London and a supporter of the UN resolution, said, “The authorisation of ‘all necessary measures’ is broad and appears to allow the targeting of Gaddafi and others who act to put civilians ‘under threat of attack,’ words that go beyond the need to establish a connection with actual attacks.”

On Sunday night, a missile was fired from a British submarine at Gaddafi’s personal compound.

Following Fox’s comments, chief of the UK defence staff General Sir David Richards said Gaddafi was “absolutely not” a target, adding, “It is not allowed under the UN resolution, and it is not something I want to discuss any further.”

Yet in the Commons debate, Fox’s declaration that Gaddafi could be assassinated went unopposed. Instead, Labour’s Jim Murphy stated that Fox’s comments had been merely “counterproductive at a time when we are trying to maintain a broad coalition including Arab opinion.”

Former Labour defence secretary Bob Ainsworth complained that Fox’s “loose talk” had let the cat out of the bag. “Even if it were sensible for Colonel Gaddafi to be targeted as part of this operation, it cannot possibly be sensible for the defence secretary to give the impression that it is OK,” he said.



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