

UK: Labour's Jeremy Corbyn refuses to call Tony Blair a war criminal

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8 July 2016

The *Financial Times* verdict on Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's response to the release of the Chilcot inquiry into the 2003 Iraq war was summed up in one word: "restraint."

The mouthpiece of the City of London was clearly pleasantly surprised. Some had expected, the newspaper wrote, that the response to the Chilcot inquiry would be "the moment that Tony Blair would be eviscerated by his successor Jeremy Corbyn in an electrifying Commons performance. The leader of the opposition was expected by some to brand the former Labour prime minister a 'war criminal' for his role in the Iraq war.

"It was all the more peculiar, then, not to hear the B-word as Mr Corbyn gave his surprisingly restrained response to the Chilcot inquiry. The word 'Blair' did not pass his lips..."

Corbyn's was a naked display of political cowardice and opportunism. No one was in a better position than he to give voice to the millions of working people who view Blair as an unindicted war criminal. Corbyn voted against the Iraq war and was popularly elected based in part upon his pledge to oppose further military adventures in Syria and Iraq.

But even after Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron made a speech defending Blair and insisting that Iraq must not be allowed to be a permanent obstacle to other British military adventures, Corbyn strove to be as elliptical as possible, stating: "We now know that the House was misled in the run-up to the war and the House must now decide how to deal with it 13 years later, just as all those who took the decisions laid bare in the Chilcot Report must face up to the consequences of their actions, whatever they may be."

Corbyn later that day addressed a meeting of military families, many who had earlier made impassioned calls

for Blair and his supporters to be prosecuted. He apologised on behalf of the Labour Party for its backing of the Iraq war, while again naming none of those who had supposedly "misled" Parliament and who must now "face up to the consequences."

In the most immediate sense, Corbyn's silence is his response to the efforts by 80 percent of Labour MPs, led by the Blairite wing of the party, to remove him as party leader.

The overwhelming June 28 no-confidence motion and the resignation of the majority of his shadow cabinet were meant to either force Corbyn to step down or precipitate a leadership contest. However, his opponents have no popular support among Labour Party members, and any contestant they stood would lose. Even their threats have spurred over 200,000 people to join the party, taking its membership to a high of 600,000.

The *New Statesman* reported that the half-century peak was reached "after a second successive day in which more than 100,000 people have applied to become party members." The vast majority, as with existing members and supporters, are pro-Corbyn.

In contrast, those demanding Corbyn quit boasted that their "Saving Labour" initiative has secured the support of high-profile celebrities such as author JK Rowling, while they have wheeled out a succession of Labour "grandees"—all with blood on their hands over Iraq—such as Alastair Campbell, Jack Straw, Peter Mandelson and even Blair himself.

As always, Corbyn, along with Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and his backers in the Momentum group, refused to mobilise against his opponents. Instead, he has again stressed his desire to maintain party unity.

To this end, Len McCluskey, the leader of Unite,

Britain's largest union and Labour's main financial backer, has organised "peace" negotiations for a settlement with the Blairites that avoids a split threatened by Corbyn's opponents. The negotiations began the day before parliament met over Chilcot, amid reports in the *Daily Telegraph* that "Labour rebels are in retreat after admitting that Jeremy Corbyn cannot be removed and would 'win easily' if a leadership election is triggered."

The *Telegraph* also reported that one of Labour's biggest individual donors, Assem Allam, has offered Labour MPs millions of pounds to help set up a new party. The *Telegraph* notes that "310 major donors have left the party's 'thousand club' of big financial backers this year, with 86 per cent citing the leadership as the main reason."

According to the *Guardian*, which has acted as a bulletin board for the coup plotters, "One source involved in the discussions said the process could result in Corbyn stepping aside before a 2020 general election, but that there could be no pre-conditions."

Only in May, a spokesman for Corbyn said that he stood by what he said during the Labour leadership contest about whether Blair should be charged for war crimes: "If he committed a war crime, yes. Everyone who's committed a war crime should be [charged]... I think it was an illegal war, I'm confident about that, indeed Kofi Annan confirmed it was an illegal war, and therefore he has to explain to that."

However, on the day Chilcot's report was published Corbyn was silent.

On the most prosaic level, decrying the leader of his opponents as a war criminal is not conducive to a "negotiated settlement." More importantly, however, the media would like to reduce the narrative of the Iraq war to the ludicrous claim that Blair's lies convinced the vast majority of MPs, including all but 84 Labour MPs, to support war. In fact, Blair's lies were transparent to millions. Parliament and the Labour Party voted for an illegal war of aggression because it agreed with Blair that supporting the US was a strategic imperative for Britain's ruling elite.

When Corbyn stood at the despatch box, and called the Iraq War "an act of military aggression launched on a false pretext," he did so as the leader of a pro-war party, one of the key political props of British imperialism for more than a century. Sitting behind him

were his opponents, among whom an analysis by Middle East Eye found that nearly 100 percent of those in parliament long enough to do so either voted for the Iraq war in 2003 or voted against convening the Chilcot investigation into the Iraq war.

That is why Corbyn was heckled by Labour MP for Dudley North Ian Austin, who told him to "sit down and shut up" and shouted, "You're a disgrace." Scottish National Party MP Deidre Brock wrote, "Head shaking & groans of discontent going up from Labour back benchers behind Corbyn as he speaks in statement on Chilcot."

Newsweek yesterday posed the question, "What effect will the Chilcot report have on the Labour Party?"

It noted that "Corbyn's deep antipathy to Blair is shared by much of Labour's membership. As a result, it has become impossible—as Liz Kendall discovered in last year's leadership election—for anyone to become party leader if the tag Blairite falls upon them. Even looser association can be damaging."

Yet it is these forces—stooges for big business, state people who Chilcot confirms work hand-in-glove with the security services in Britain and the United States, who are despised by their own members and by far broader layers of working people—that dictate what happens in the Labour Party. The response to the Chilcot report confirms the futility of all efforts to transform such a party into a political vehicle for the defence of working people and an opponent of militarism and war. A genuine movement against war must instead proceed in implacable opposition to Labour and to the trade unions, for which Corbyn acts as a loyal apologist.



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