

Former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair knighted, courtesy of Corbyn's cowardice

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Tony Blair's knighthood in the New Year's honours list is an insult to the millions around the country and throughout the world who despise him.

Even when measured against former Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher and now Boris Johnson, Blair is the most hated politician in the UK. He will be forever associated with the illegal war of aggression against Iraq, waged in alliance with the United States under President George W. Bush based on lies claiming Saddam Hussein's regime possessed weapons of mass destruction that were a direct threat to the Western powers.

Opposition to the war was massive, with upwards of one-and-a-half million people taking to the streets of London on February 15, 2003, as part of the world's largest global protest mobilising over 11 million people.

The fears expressed by working people were realised in a grotesquely unequal conflict that led to hundreds of thousands of deaths, countless maimings, the destruction of whole cities and the dismemberment of Iraqi society. Together with the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, it marked an explosion of imperialist militarism, centred on the Middle East, and prepared the way for subsequent catastrophic interventions in Libya and Syria.

Blair's domestic record was no less reactionary. He left office in 2007 having vastly expanded the role of the private sector in essential public services, encouraged social inequality, trampled over democratic rights and finalised Labour's transformation into a Tory Party mark two that earned him the praise of Thatcher and the undying hatred of the working class.

The former Labour leader's knighthood was greeted with a wave of anger and contempt. One million people, at the time of writing had signed the petition, "Tony Blair to have his 'Knight Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter' rescinded". Its introduction argues that Blair "should be held accountable for war crimes."

Many have noted that the grotesque honour was bestowed on Blair in the week that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange marked 1,000 days entombed in Belmarsh Prison, fighting extradition to the US and a lifetime in jail for exposing the war crimes perpetrated in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Families of soldiers killed or injured unnecessarily in these bloody military adventures expressed outrage and said they will return military medals if the knighthood goes ahead.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who leads a thoroughly Blairite cabinet, came forward as expected to defend Blair's knighthood.

But he squirmed like a worm on a hook while doing so. Insisting on ITV's *Good Morning Britain* that the issue was not "thorny at all" and that Blair "deserves the honour", he was forced to acknowledge "strong views on the Iraq war" while arguing pathetically that this did not "detract from the fact that Tony Blair was a very successful prime minister of this country".

The Blairites were so nervous that Starmer was almost alone in mounting a defence of their ideological mentor.

This makes more extraordinary still the fact that it took a full five-days before any figure on the Labour Party's nominal "left" made any response. Even for much of Thursday, the media was reduced to citing one Labour MP who hid behind "speaking on condition of anonymity" to describe Blair as an "untried war criminal", and a single Twitter comment from Socialist Campaign Group MP Richard Burgon that "it says a lot about what is wrong with our system when after being one of the leading architects of the war on Iraq, Tony Blair, is honoured with a knighthood".

Only later that day did former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn publish a tweet in which, unlike even Burgon, he succeeded in not mentioning Blair by name.

"This underlines once more what a disastrous act of aggression the war on Iraq was," he wrote. "Parliament must never be misled into backing an illegal war again."

The tweet was not even written in direct reference to Blair's knighthood, but to an *Independent* article reporting Blair's own defence secretary, Geoff Hoon, claiming in his self-serving memoir that he had been told to "burn" legal advice ahead of the Iraq invasion warning of its illegality. A co-conspirator with Blair, Hoon's memoirs were published two months ago and dug out first by the pro-Conservative *Daily Mail* in the absence of any oppositional Labour angle on the Blair knighthood story.

This is the closest Corbyn could get to saying nothing without maintaining his by then deafening silence. No one should be surprised by this. His weasel words are in line with his four-and-a-half-year tenure as leader of the Labour Party, during which he did everything possible to defend the party's Blairite core.

Corbyn's popular reputation as a "left" was built on his opposition to the Iraq war, in particular his speech to the 2003 protest in London warning that a war "will set off a spiral of conflict, of hate, of misery, of desperation that will fuel the wars, the conflict, the terrorism, the depression and the misery of future generations" and telling Blair, "Stop now or pay the political price." He was chair of the Stop the War Coalition from 2011 until

taking leadership of the Labour Party in September 2015.

During the leadership election, Corbyn was asked if Blair should stand trial for war crimes and replied, “If he has committed a war crime, yes. Everybody who has committed a war crime should be.” He continued, “It was an illegal war. I am confident about that... Is he going to be tried for it? I don’t know. Could he be tried for it? Possibly.”

Referring to the ongoing Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War, he concluded, “At that point Tony Blair and the others that have made the decisions are then going to have to deal with the consequences of it.”

Statements like these indicating that he would finally bring the Blairites to account won Corbyn an unprecedented 59.5 percent of first preference votes, delivered by hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters itching for a political fight with the party right-wing. The only candidate to openly identify herself with Blair’s toxic legacy, Liz Kendall, came last with 4.5 percent.

Just two months later, Corbyn was handed a golden opportunity to drive Blair and his acolytes out of the Labour Party. The Chilcot Inquiry was published in July 2016. Stopping short of declaring the war illegal, Chilcot nevertheless said the case for war was “deficient,” that peaceful diplomatic options had not been exhausted and war was therefore “not a last resort”, and that the legal case for UK military action was “far from satisfactory.”

Even Blair’s deputy prime minister, John Prescott, admitted in the *Mirror* in response that the war had been illegal, saying he would have to “live with the decision of going to war and its catastrophic consequences for the rest of my life.”

Corbyn’s own response at a time when the Blairites were on the ropes proved him to be a despicable political coward. 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. But at the parliamentary debate on the Chilcot Inquiry on July 6, he apologised on behalf of the Labour Party for its role in the conflict while refusing to name anyone responsible. The *Financial Times* reported with surprise, “The word ‘Blair’ did not pass his lips. Neither did ‘my predecessor’. Nor even ‘the former Labour prime minister’.”

For his pains, the Blairite scoundrel Ian Austin MP told Corbyn to “sit down and shut up” during his speech and to called him “a disgrace”. Scottish National Party MP Deidre Brock noted, “Head shaking & groans of discontent going up from Labour back benchers behind Corbyn as he speaks in statement on Chilcot.”

As happened again and again, it was the Blairites and not Corbyn who were allowed to go on the offensive. Two weeks before, 23 of his shadow cabinet members had resigned and 172 Labour MPs had delivered a vote of no confidence in his leadership, in the early stages of an attempted political coup which produced a second leadership election from July-September 2016.

Yet it was Corbyn who was objectively in the most powerful political position and who had mass support. He was re-elected on September 24 with an even larger percentage of the popular vote.

He responded with yet more efforts to build bridges to the hated Blairite cabal in the parliamentary party, preaching “unity” with those who had stabbed him in the back. By October 2019, Corbyn’s Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell was being

interviewed by Blair’s spin doctor Alastair Campbell, who had been kicked out of the party for bragging about voting for the Liberal Democrats. Campbell asked McDonnell directly, “Is Tony Blair a war criminal?” to which Corbyn’s right-hand man replied, “No! No!” Asked whether he supported Campbell’s expulsion, he replied, “No... Come back, Alastair, all is forgiven!”

With Corbyn focused on appeasement, it was left to the SNP to table a motion, debated in November 2016, calling for an investigation into Blair’s “misleading” of parliament over Iraq.

This time there was no pretence of opposition from a penitent Corbyn and his allies. Just five Labour MPs voted in favour of the motion, with 158 against. In arguably the most shameful of many shameful actions, Corbyn did not even attend the debate.

Not even this gave pause to Corbyn’s apologists in Britain’s pseudo-left groups. Momentum, the Stop the War Coalition, and the Stalinist *Morning Star* refused to mention Corbyn’s absence. The Socialist Workers Party claimed pathetically that he had been “committed elsewhere”. The Socialist Party suggested politely that he had made a “mistake”.

Today, just as Corbyn cannot bring himself to speak Blair’s name as he tries desperately to argue that workers must remain loyal to Labour, so too the pseudo-left cannot explain—while making their ad hominem denunciations of Blair—why he is in a position to receive his knighthood after the Labour “left” they so steadfastly championed led the party for nearly five years.

If there was ever a time for Labour members to deal with Blair, it was 2016. Corbyn, however, used the year to turn the massive popular movement which twice secured his election into a rout. The result is that five years later, Sir Anthony Charles Lynton Blair KG is being praised by Starmer as the leader of the pro-big business, pro-imperialist, pro-war party Corbyn inherited from Ed Miliband and then left untouched.

The anger directed against Blair is more properly the common property of the entire Labour Party, including its shrinking and widely discredited left apologists. The years during which Corbyn and his various acolytes promised that Labour could be pushed to the left and would act as a political champion of the working class proved to be an unmitigated disaster. Corbyn gave Labour back to the Blairites and, having allowed his own supporters to be witch-hunted and expelled amid lying accusations of anti-Semitism, is still on the stump for Labour even though he has been suspended from the parliamentary party.

He does so after his betrayal of the mass support he enjoyed handed power to Boris Johnson and the Conservatives in 2019, leaving millions facing a de-facto government of national unity implementing a herd immunity agenda that has claimed over 174,000 lives. The mass socialist movement desperately needed by the working class to take on capitalism and all its political defenders will only be developed in uncompromising opposition to everything both Blair and Corbyn represent.



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