

Britain: Blair meets Bush amidst a growing governmental crisis

By Chris Marsden
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The summit meeting between President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair at the president's ranch in Crawford, Texas was meant to concentrate on elaborating plans for military action against Iraq. Instead it has been transformed into a crisis meeting to discuss the danger to Middle East stability posed by Israel's invasion of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Following Bush's April 4 speech urging an Israeli withdrawal, a largely sycophantic British media credited Blair with having persuaded the president to tone-down his overt support for Ariel Sharon's efforts to destroy the Palestinian Authority. Descriptions of Blair's role in regards to the US administration usually fall into two camps: his supporters hail him as a wise counsel urging caution on Bush and a vital bridge between the US and Europe, while his growing array of critics depict him as Bush's poodle, dancing to Washington's tune and sacrificing Britain's own independent interests in the process.

Though there is an element of caricature in both positions, the latter is closer to the truth. There is no reason to deny that Blair privately entertained doubts over Bush's support for Sharon's military offensive, but this must be understood within the context of his government's full support for US plans for war against Iraq. As with Bush, any efforts on Blair's part to urge restraint upon Sharon are only in order to ensure the eventual success of their joint plans to transform the Middle East into a US protectorate—with British companies hopefully also benefiting from these arrangements.

Up until Bush made his public statement, Blair had not made a single public criticism of either the Israeli offensive or US policy in the region. Instead he had maintained a deathly silence on the fate of the

Palestinians, while seeking to suppress growing opposition within his own party to Britain supporting America's planned war against Iraq.

Blair has not made even the most mealy-mouthed criticisms of Sharon or appealed for the US to call off its dogs. His situation was made increasingly untenable after 122 MPs, mostly from the Labour Party, signed a motion expressing "deep unease" over plans for war against Iraq and urging "restraint"—linking this to fears for Mideast stability as a result of Sharon's invasion and siege against Arafat's Palestinian Authority.

Parliament was recalled on April 3 to enable MPs to pay tribute to the recently deceased Queen Mother. Blair refused to countenance appeals by some Labour MPs for parliament to also debate the situation in the Middle East prior to his departure for Texas. Veteran Labour MP and father of the house Tam Dalyell requested the extension of the debate. He told the *Mirror* newspaper, "I just despair of what is happening and yet there is no condemnation from our prime minister. I want him to tell Sharon that his policy has no hope of success, it is making everything worse. And for the prime minister to be thinking of attacking Iraq at such a time is sheer folly."

Alice Mahon MP said that Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon had "no authority" to speak for Labour. "Jack Straw is not, for example, suggesting Britain intervene to help the Palestinians," she said. "If Britain is trying to be a global policeman on the US scale, the money is going to come from hospitals, schools, pensions and the other necessities of people's lives."

Others who have criticised Blair's support for a military attack on Iraq include former cabinet ministers Chris Smith and Frank Dobson, and Foreign Office Minister Tony Lloyd, who warned, "Any massive

strike against Iraq would further polarise and alienate opinion within the Middle East and broader afield.”

The Campaign Group of Labour MPs claimed that a majority of the 641 constituency Labour parties would oppose further action against Iraq.

In the event, parliament proceeded with a nauseous display of collective royalist sycophancy and mourning for Britain’s past imperial grandeur with no protest being raised by Blair’s critics.

Earlier this week, Number 10 had promised to issue an intelligence dossier confirming Saddam Hussein was actively building so-called weapons of mass destruction, but the document’s release was cancelled. The MI6 dossier was said to be weak in its evidence on the existence of a weapons programme and does not link Iraq to the September 11 terrorist atrocities. It also casts doubt on reports that hijacker Mohammed Atta met an Iraqi intelligence official in Prague.

On the day of Bush’s speech, Iraq issued a direct challenge to Blair to prove it was developing weapons of mass destruction. Foreign Minister Dr Naji Sabri told Blair to “send the team of your inspectors to Baghdad. There are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. There are no means of producing them.”

Blair therefore welcomed Bush’s speech as a green light for his own retreat in the face of mounting political difficulties. It was only after the president had spoken that Blair finally found his voice. Israeli-Palestinian violence “has the makings of a catastrophe,” he said, in an interview with NBC television. Violence will not stop without some kind of political framework, he added, and Bush had taken the right step in trying to engage both sides. A spokesman also took pains to deny any plans for imminent military action against Iraq.

Even so, his government’s cautionary tone was couched in terms stressing loyalty to US interests. Blair’s official spokesman said, “Two sides will not be able to make progress alone. You have to have a third party to bring the sides together to get a political dialogue going. You need an external force, external pressure, to bring the political process forward all the time. That is why we want to help the United States to play this role.”

Moreover the door was left open for Britain to accede in whatever policy decision Washington makes with respect to Iraq. Blair’s spokesman added, “Iraq is an

issue that is not going to go away. You cannot put your head in the sand and pretend that weapons of mass destruction do not exist. The Crawford meeting will give us a chance to get a better understanding of the nature of the threat we face and the options available for dealing with it.”

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