

Tory leadership challenger Ken Clarke lambasts Blair on Iraq and democratic rights

By Chris Marsden
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Ken Clarke began his campaign to become the leader of the Conservative Party last week by attacking the Labour government over the war in Iraq, its alienating of British Muslims and the threat to democratic rights represented by anti-terror legislation.

Clarke said the decision to invade Iraq was “disastrous” and has “made Britain one of the foremost targets for Islamic extremists.”

Blair had betrayed Britain’s national interest by his uncritical support for Washington.

“The reasons given to Parliament for joining the invasion were bogus,” Clarke said, and had been a diversion from the fight against Al Qaeda. “US Presidents are not always right.... The transatlantic partnership has to be just that, a partnership.... President Bush will do what he thinks is right for America—and so he should, that’s his job. Just as Tony Blair should do what is right for Britain because that is his responsibility.”

On the fallout from Iraq, Clarke stated, “If the prime minister really believes it, he must be the only person left who thinks that the recent bombs in London had no connection at all with his policy in Iraq.”

He warned against a tendency on the part of the government to respond “to every terrorist event” by proposing “new tougher anti-terrorist laws.” “No amount of military action,” he said, “on however great a scale nor tough legislation of however draconian a nature are in themselves going to make us safer or usher in a saner and more rational world. Constructive political responses are far more important. We found that out for ourselves in Northern Ireland.”

Clarke insisted, “The methods we use to fight the terrorists should neither undermine our fundamental belief in the rule of law nor give them new grievances to exploit.... At various times during the troubles in Northern Ireland Conservative ministers were urged to lift the restraints on the security forces. We all get frustrated by the failure to catch the guilty, especially when there has been loss of life, but adopting the methods of the enemy is not the way to beat terrorism. It is also a counsel of despair. Despite criticism in some quarters, we did stick to the rule of law in Northern Ireland. We were right to do so.

“Suspending our normal respect for human rights in the belief that somehow ‘political correctness’ is hampering the fight against terrorism will only further alienate Muslim opinion.”

“The sort of unusual measure that is not acceptable in a democratic society is that known in the United States as ‘extraordinary rendition,’” he said. “This is a process by which people are captured by or passed to US forces anywhere in the world and then taken to countries that have been heavily criticised for using torture. It appears to be designed to get round the prohibition on torture in the USA.”

The Blair government shared responsibility for the actions of the US because it refused “to say whether British citizens or residents have

been the subject of extraordinary rendition. It will not comment on claims that British territory has been used by the US for this purpose. It does not deny having received intelligence from people who have been tortured.

“I never thought I would live in a society where the British government has refused to deny that captured people may be flown out of British airports to some third country where they can be tortured. What kind of country have we become if we permit such outrages?”

On the role played by the US occupation forces, Clarke added, “I am frankly astonished that US politicians who were quick to lecture the British in the past about miscarriages of justice and alleged brutality by the security forces in Northern Ireland, seem unable to understand the damage to Western credibility done by the scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay. Dubious interrogation techniques might produce information quickly but the effects on public opinion of this approach in the long term far outweigh the short-term benefits. You do not defend the rule of law successfully by breaking it.”

Clarke said that he “strongly opposed” the Blair government’s use of control orders “because I do not believe that politicians should ever have the power to deprive people of their liberty.”

In a direct reference to the police shooting of Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes, he insisted that “whatever measures we do take to tackle terrorism, they must take account of the danger of the wrong person being arrested or even being killed.”

By any measure Clarke’s was a bravura performance—easily the most sustained attack mounted on the government and Prime Minister Tony Blair in years.

It is a feature of the present political situation that he can score points against a supposedly Labour government on such issues as war and democratic rights. After all, Clarke served as a minister throughout 18 years of Conservative government and was responsible for introducing the internal market into the National Health Service. His Thatcherite credentials as home secretary and chancellor of the exchequer are impeccable on everything other than Europe. Yet today he can be portrayed as a “left winger” by the media when compared with Blair.

His was clearly a popular message, demonstrating once again the extent to which Blair took Britain to war in defiance of the will of the electorate. Opinion polls since Clarke announced his candidate have confirmed him as the best-known and most respected Tory politician, most likely to persuade people to vote for the party by an overwhelming majority.

One might expect that this would make him a shoe-in for the position of leader of a crisis-ridden party that has been in the political

wilderness for eight years. But this is far from being the case. There are contradictory reports about the reaction to Clarke's candidacy in the Tory Party, with the *Times* stating that there was a move towards him by previously hostile local party chairs because he had the best chance of winning power.

But this is despite his opposition to the Iraq war, not because of it. Equally, there is no appetite within the party for criticism of anti-terror measures or a foreign policy that threatens to bring Britain into conflict with Washington and make it more reliant on Europe. Clarke actually benefits from a belief that the issue of greater European integration is off the agenda for the foreseeable future.

There may be support in the general population for his message, but not within a party that is lurching ever further to the right. Writing in the *Telegraph*, Mathew D'Ancona goes so far as to raise concerns that Clarke's antiwar position may split the party.

He commented, "The problem is that—having done so much to nurture the divide over Europe in Conservative ranks—he now proposes to create a completely new rift. Whether he likes it or not, only 15 Tory MPs voted against the war in March 2003, not all of whom are still in the Commons. If Mr. Clarke became leader, his shadow cabinet would—of necessity—include many who strongly supported the liberation of Iraq, whatever their specific reservations about Mr. Blair's handling of it.

"How would Mr. Clarke, as Opposition Leader, take the Prime Minister to task over a war which most of his Conservative colleagues still believe was justified?"

D'Ancona concludes by warning, "Already, the Conservative Party has gone into convulsions over Mr. Clarke's entry to the race."

The liberal media was equally hostile to Clarke's comments on Iraq and civil liberties. Certainly no one was embarrassed by the fact that a Tory did a better job of critiquing the government's worst excesses than they have done. Instead the *Guardian's* editorial staff comforted themselves with the fact that Clarke has little chance of winning the leadership contest and that, even if he did, by then Chancellor Gordon Brown would be a new Labour leader hopefully less tainted by the Iraq war.

What the reaction to Clarke's speech confirmed is the insistence by the *World Socialist Web Site* that there no longer exists any significant constituency for an anti-militarist foreign policy or the preservation of democratic rights within the bourgeoisie.

From the standpoint of preserving the interests of capital, much of what Clarke said should have been ABC. He warned that Iraq had proved to be a disaster, which had damaged the long-term interests of British imperialism and, together with the government's flagrant disregard for democratic norms, has politically destabilized and polarized Britain itself.

Clarke is not alone within ruling circles in believing this to be the case. But those who do so are no longer in charge, whether in government or in the opposition parties. The only person Clarke could even cite as a fellow thinker in his speech was the now deceased Robin Cook, who retired from Blair's cabinet over Iraq.

Politics has become the exclusive province of a super-rich elite, most of whom have acquired their vast wealth relatively recently—and often quite easily. This layer—who head major transnational corporations—have come to prominence in the era of global capital markets and investment and are relatively indifferent to the political impact and exacerbation of class antagonisms resulting from their efforts to plunder the world's resources. This indifference is compounded by ignorance. The dominant voices within ruling circles

have enjoyed a situation characterized above all by the collapse of both the Stalinist regimes and of the old organizations of the labour movement and the resulting exclusion of working people from political life. Most of them have no real conception that a mass social and political movement can emerge to threaten their exceedingly comfortable existence.

Clarke, who became politically active in the 1960s and has firsthand experience of mass strike movements and even the downfall of a Tory government, certainly does. He is therefore more keenly aware of the social and political divisions wracking Britain and their possible implications for the future. At one point in his speech, for example, he stated his belief that "talking about immigration issues can divert attention from the question of the fractured communities that exist in many towns and cities in our country. We are not just talking about divisions between white, brown and black here but as much about divisions between different generations of ethnic minorities and between the genders. There are divisions of class and income too."

Such concern for the long-term stability of British society is what lies behind his criticisms of Blair. However, this does not make him an opponent of war, let alone a defender of democratic rights.

The turn to militarism and war—and the erosion of democratic rights necessitated by growing social conflicts—are not the result of subjective policy decisions. They arise out of the objective crisis of British and world capitalism and the growing competition between the major powers for control of vital world resources and markets. If Clarke assumed leadership of the Tory Party then he would preside over a political agenda no less reactionary than Blair. The interests of big capital demand nothing less.

He made this perfectly clear when his speech moved away from criticisms of the government and addressed his own policies. "I had previously supported every war embarked upon by a British government of whatever party throughout my parliamentary career," he said.

Clarke opposed war against Iraq because he believed it was detrimental to the interests of British imperialism. But this same concern makes him all the more determined that having been occupied, the war effort in Iraq must succeed at all costs.

"What has been done, has been done," he declared. "I do not believe, as leftist critics of the war argue, that we should just pull the troops out.... Let us be clear about one thing: we cannot just walk out of Iraq. That would be shameful. We started the job and we have to finish it."

He is also at pains to make clear that he supports political repression and the extension of police powers at home, providing only that it is done with a greater degree of intelligence and sensitivity than has been displayed by Blair.

"Of course we need some special laws to deal with terrorism," he stated. "The question is not whether the police need exceptional powers but what powers they should have and under what control." One measure he positively recommended was the use of non-jury courts like the Diplock system employed in Northern Ireland against the IRA.

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