

Britain's "Euston Manifesto": Ex-liberals for imperialism and war

By Chris Marsden and Julie Hyland
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On May 25, the "Euston Manifesto" is to be officially launched at a rally in London. Described by its authors as the basis for a "new progressive democratic alliance," it is being depicted by the British media as a major political and intellectual event.

There can be few occasions in which so much hype has been devoted to something of so little worth, and where the actual content of a document has been so misrepresented.

The manifesto was drafted by a number of former left and liberal academics and journalists. Most of its prominent supporters defended the Iraq war based on the premise that US and British imperialism should be entrusted with opposing dictatorship and spreading democracy. Amidst the bloody debacle created by the invasion and occupation of Iraq, its authors are now seeking to elaborate a rationale for continuing to advocate imperialist intervention—at a time when preparations are already well advanced for war against Iran.

The major figures involved in popularising the manifesto are Norman Geras, emeritus professor of politics at Manchester University, who was once associated with the "New Left," and Nick Cohen, a columnist on the *Observer* who combines criticisms of the Blair government's relations with big business with a strident advocacy of all aspects of the so-called "war on terror."

They were amongst a group of 20 or so "like-minded progressives" who met in a pub in Euston, London, in May 2005. They include both individual supporters of the Labour government and moving forces behind various campaign groups and web sites with a pro-Labour, pro-Iraq war message. Many come from a left-Zionist background and are now grouped around *Engage*, which is dedicated to identifying and opposing "left and liberal anti-Semitism in the labour movement."

Prior to and during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, this layer had the wind in their sails. They were feted by the media and called on to write op-ed pieces denouncing anti-war protestors as apologists for Saddam. With the US and Britain now widely loathed within Iraq, and public hostility to the war and occupation continuing to grow within Britain, the manifesto's authors clearly feel themselves to be an embattled minority. However, this experience has not caused them to reconsider their previous apologies for imperialism.

The manifesto states that the "founding supporters of this statement took different views on the military intervention in Iraq, both for and against." But any signatories who may have opposed the Iraq war now have no difficulty in aligning themselves with the pro-war majority within the group. The manifesto asserts that

all are agreed the overthrow of the Baathist regime represented the "liberation of the Iraqi people" and laid the foundation for democracy.

The document begins with a call for "a fresh political alignment" that reaches out "beyond the socialist Left towards egalitarian liberals and others of unambiguous democratic commitment."

In truth, the Euston group has nothing but contempt for what they choose to describe as the "socialist Left." The manifesto is largely made up of denunciations of unspecified left groups and individuals for supposedly betraying the democratic ideals that the authors alone continue to uphold. They complain that they are a "constituency [that] is under-represented...in much of the media and the other forums of contemporary political life," given that the rest of the "left" has "lately shown themselves rather too flexible about these values."

The real flexibility with regard to democratic values is displayed by the Euston group. They do everything they can to minimise and belittle the attacks on civil liberties carried out by the Bush administration in the United States and the government of Tony Blair in Britain. The most glaring example is the authors' attitude to the illegal war against Iraq, epitomised by the statement that they are not interested in "picking through the rubble of the arguments over intervention."

Instead, the manifesto proclaims: "We must define ourselves against those for whom the entire progressive-democratic agenda has been subordinated to a blanket and simplistic 'anti-imperialism' and/or hostility to the current US administration."

It continues: "The violation of basic human rights standards at Abu Ghraib, at Guantanamo, and by the practice of 'rendition' must be roundly condemned" as a departure from those "universal principles" for which "the democratic countries themselves, and in particular the United States of America, bear the greater part of the historical credit." But anyone who makes too much of such "departures" is accused of "double standards" and moral "relativism." Even Amnesty International is attacked for making a "grotesque public comparison of Guantanamo with the Gulag."

With regards to the United States, the Euston group resorts to the type of sleight of hand of which they accuse their opponents. They make no distinction between the reactionary clique in the White House and the American people, in order to condemn opposition to the Bush administration as motivated by "anti-Americanism."

The US continues to be “the home of a strong democracy with a noble tradition behind it and lasting constitutional and social achievements to its name,” the manifesto declares, obscuring the fact that these very “achievements” are under ferocious assault by the US administration and ruling elite.

Much of the document consists of platitudes and truisms, such as its description of terrorism as a “crime under international law” and professions of support for the democratic principles of the Enlightenment that are meant imply that the Euston group’s political opponents do not share these beliefs.

The manifesto’s authors gather together every slander ever made against the anti-war movement and regurgitate every excuse for the predatory actions of Washington and London.

“Leftists who make common cause with, or excuses for, anti-democratic forces should be criticised in clear and forthright terms,” they state, portraying opponents of the occupation of Iraq as de facto allies of Islamic fundamentalists.

No such condemnation is made of the political right for supporting anti-democratic forces. On this front, the Euston group is preoccupied with finding only light amidst the darkness. “Conversely,” the manifesto continues, “we pay attention to liberal and conservative voices and ideas if they contribute to strengthening democratic norms and practices and to the battle for human progress.”

How then, according to the Euston group, are these “liberal and conservative voices” to wage the battle for human progress? Precisely by supporting the continued resort to military force.

“Humanitarian intervention, when necessary, is not a matter of disregarding sovereignty,” the manifesto states reassuringly. If a state is deemed to have violated the rights of its people, “its claim to sovereignty is forfeited and there is a duty upon the international community of intervention and rescue.”

These words could have been delivered by Prime Minister Tony Blair. He has specialised for years in feigning selective outrage towards countries targeted for great power intervention, in order to portray “regime change” as a great civilising mission. Such propaganda has in the past played an important role, given the instinctive popular opposition to the Iraq war and the suspicion, entirely justified, that the real motive of Washington and London is to secure hegemony over Middle Eastern oil supplies.

This type of demagoguery has served to divert attention from the implications of the Bush administration’s policy of pre-emptive war—which rejects international legal principles such as national sovereignty whenever and wherever Washington perceives a threat to American imperialist interests. The Iraq invasion and its aftermath have exposed such sophistries, necessitating the desperate attempt by the signatories of the Euston Manifesto to issue their pseudo-democratic apologia for military aggression.

This essential aim of the manifesto is well recognised by the Euston group’s target audience. Support has come from two camps. In Britain, it was welcomed by a number of pro-Labour *Guardian* and *Observer* columnists, such as Will Hutton, and it was signed by *Financial Times* journalist John Lloyd, as well as Julie Burchill and Oliver Kamm of the *Times*, all of whom were supporters of the Iraq war. Kamm is the author of *Anti-Totalitarianism: The Left-wing Case for a Neoconservative*

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Christopher Hitchens wrote that he was “flattered by an invitation to sign it, and I probably will, but if I agree it will be the most conservative document that I have ever initialled.” For Hitchens, it is presumably “conservative” because it is ostensibly oriented to a political left from which he has long since broken in order to become an avowed admirer of the neo-conservatives in Washington.

He need not have worried over-much, because the manifesto has also been endorsed by the American neo-conservative William Kristol. Writing in the *Weekly Standard* under the headline “A Few Good Liberals,” Kristol described the manifesto as an “impressive document” and asked whether in the fight against “tyranny and terror” it was “too much to hope that decent liberals and conservatives could make common cause?” Replying to his own question, he wrote: “We think not, and we hope that this clarion call from overseas might contribute to a rebirth of political courage and moral clarity on the American left as well.”

There could not be a more damning exposure of the Euston group’s political pretensions than Kristol’s endorsement. A co-founder of “Project for the New American Century” and a long-time member of the American Enterprise Institute, both notorious right-wing think tanks, Kristol advocated war against Iraq to bring about regime change as early as 1998, pointing to Iraq’s possession of “a significant portion of the world’s supply of oil.”

Kristol has no difficulty recognising, behind the Euston group’s “democratic” window dressing, the movement of a layer of former liberals firmly into the camp of imperialist reaction.

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