

Tony Blair's Dilemma

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AN ALMOST incredible spectacle: Tony Blair, a politician whose entire career has been built on pandering to opinion polls, finds himself isolated, confronting massive opposition not only among the rank and file of the hitherto docile New Labour, but also within the Establishment – including not only the leaders of the Church of England and all other religious denominations (except the Chief Rabbi), but also the top brass of the armed forces – as well as in his own Cabinet, and of course among the public at large, even among his main target social group of Middle England.

On 15 February 2003, the day of the largest protest demonstration in British history, Tony Blair spoke in Glasgow to a meeting of his Scottish party functionaries. There this popularity junkie had to admit his unpopularity. Outside, tens of thousands of his voters expressed their hostility. His assurances of earnestness fail to convince. Public incredulity is spinning out of control; the slickest spin-doctoring outfit in British political history cannot cope.

Tony Blair is clearly lying when he claims that his readiness to go to war against Iraq is motivated by considerations of morality (compassion with the Iraqi people oppressed by a bloody tyrant), or concern for the security of Britain or the safety of the world. He is lying, and most British people can see he is lying.

One simply has to ask: suppose the rulers of the US were not keen to go to attack Iraq; would Tony Blair have tried to persuade them to do so? The very thought is absurd. No; of course not. Tony Blair is advocating war because, and solely because, G.W. Bush and his advisers have decided, quite unilaterally and without considering the wishes of any foreign leader, that Iraq must be invaded by US forces.

And yet, Tony Blair is quite sincere in the belief that his present policy is in what he thinks of as the “national interest” (which is in reality the interest of the British state, and, ultimately, that of the British ruling class). He is risking his political future because he genuinely feels he has no choice.

How has it come to this strange pass?

Since the Second World War and the loss of the British Empire, the British ruling class has pursued with almost total consistency a fundamental precept in its foreign policy: balancing between the US and Europe. This mid-Atlantic policy of being the bridge or the go-between – pandering to US interests in Europe, but modulating them to be more acceptable on this side of the Atlantic – has guided the ruling class, the holders of real power in the British state, whichever party was in office. It was this policy that has enabled Britain to “punch above its weight”: to have greater international influence than its actual size and industrial performance could have secured. This international influence, with all the material advantages accruing from it, is vitally important for the British ruling class, dominated as it is by its financial sector. Whereas British industry (except for oil) is in secular decline, the oil sector has remained a global player; and the City of London, with its banking and insurance business is one of the world's leading financial centres. Britain's oil interests and the City's vast investments and businesses are by no means confined to Britain itself or even to Europe but are spread over the entire globe.

The only departure from this mid-Atlantic policy was the 1956 Suez episode, the last flickering of independent British imperialism, in which Britain, in collusion with France and Israel, invaded Egyptian territory without prior US approval. But Britain was soon brought to heel by the Eisenhower-Dulles US administration. The humiliating end of this adventure taught the British ruling class a lasting lesson. This lesson was not that it was wrong to commit aggression against an Arab country whose military ruler is depicted as a latter-day Hitler. Rather, it was that Britain must not stray from the American fold.

On the whole, the mid-Atlantic strategy has worked well. It did grant Britain considerable international influence, and paid off handsome dividends to the City.

It must be stressed that this strategy requires Britain not only to stay inseparably close to US policy (the so-called “special relation”) but also to

be part of the European Union. Let us not forget that Winston Churchill was one of the early advocates of European unification. In May 1948 he presided over the Hague Congress for European Unity; and on 11 August 1950, at the Strasbourg Congress of the European Movement, he carried a motion for creation of a European Army.

There have only been two periods in which this strategy malfunctioned. The first was in the 1960s. On 14 January 1963, France's President Charles de Gaulle – resenting Britain's pretensions to an international stature above its true station – stated his decision to block Britain's entry into the European Common Market. Significantly, in the same speech he rejected the US offer of Polaris missiles and asserted French ambition for military independence. Eight days later he signed with Germany's Chancellor Konrad Adenauer a Treaty of Franco-German cooperation. His strategy was to boost the international stature of France by building up Europe as a world power, led and dominated by France in alliance with Germany. Britain would not be allowed to play the role of mid-Atlantic go-between – or, as de Gaulle saw it, America's Trojan horse in Europe. But after de Gaulle's demise things went back to normal, and by 1973 the UK had joined the Common Market.

The second period is now. In the new post-cold-war uni-polar world order, Britain's mid-Atlantic ship has again encountered rocks that threaten to wreck it. The US is now the sole super-power; and, especially after the accession of the G.W. Bush administration, its international

stance is increasingly arrogant, its foreign policy aggressively unilateral, its assertion of global hegemony crudely overt. As the two sides of the Atlantic seem to grow further apart, taking the traditional British mid-Atlantic course becomes very problematic. Instead of bringing the two sides together, Britain risks becoming isolated from at least one of them.

The British state is faced with a painful choice. But the lessons of the 1950s and 1960s have taught the British ruling class that incurring the wrath of the US (as in 1956) is more humiliating and damaging for it than being isolated from Europe.

Tony Blair is only doing what any British prime minister would do as a loyal servant of the "national interest". The reason he now seems to be playing the abject role of Bush's poodle is not that British policy has changed; it is the circumstances that have changed, and have put him in an exposed position. To go against the US would mean a major change in British post-colonial international strategy. But whereas the traditional policy is malfunctioning, Blair has no alternative policy. There is no Plan B.

So willy-nilly the popularity junkie has to put a brave face on it and choose isolation from the British electorate – hoping desperately that it will prove to be a temporary isolation – rather than from the US masters of the New World Order.

He must be praying that either the US will desist from its war, or that a quick victory will restore his popularity. Otherwise his political career is at an end. But Britain will still be looking for a new international strategy. ■

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