

Britain's Neo-Con Blair Is Between Bush and a Hard Place

by Mary Burdman

British Prime Minister Tony Blair showed what political pressure he is under, during his foreign policy speech at the Lord Mayor of London's dinner at Mansion House in the City of London Nov. 15. This is the second most important political speech of the year, after the Queen's Speech (actually written by the government), delivered as a "state of the union" about a month after the October opening of Parliament.

Blair, just back from his visit to President George Bush in Washington Nov. 11-12, made a fervent plea for his brand of evangelical "progressive democracy" as the way to conquer all. Blair was the first foreign leader to visit Washington after the U.S. Presidential elections; he departed amidst general demand that he get some concessions from the Bush Administration on the Israel-Palestine deadlock, and returned with nothing of substance.

In his speech, Blair trumpeted Britain's "unique" role between the United States and Europe, but tried to give equal weight to the importance of both sides of the Atlantic. The tension came through at the end, when Blair referred to this "unique" role as "a damn high wire, which is how it often feels; our job is to keep our sights firmly on both sides of the Atlantic. . . . In doing so, we are not subverting our country either into an American poodle or a European municipality." Blair has constantly been denounced as George Bush's "poodle" for his commitment to the war on Iraq—including by a British journalist at the joint press conference with Bush Nov. 12.

In reality, Blair is not just a fawner on neo-conservative Washington: He was himself an architect of the warhawk policy in Southwest Asia. In the 1990s, Blair had put heavy pressure on then-President Bill Clinton to go beyond bombing, and into war against Iraq. When the Bush-Cheney Administration came in, Blair was deeply involved with leading neo-cons in Washington to set up a situation in which he could sell the highly unpopular war inside Britain. Last month, leading U.S. neo-cons, including the heinous Richard Perle, hailed Blair one of their own.

In his Mansion House speech, Blair had to admit that, because of the Iraq war, the U.S.-European relationship "is under question as never before. So now is the time to defend it." Britain's role is to help push everything in the "democracy" direction, because, he claimed, "American policy is evolving": "Europe and America should be working together

to bring the democratic human and political rights we take for granted, to the world denied them." He made these statements as U.S. forces were destroying the city of Fallujah.

The 'Progressive' Neo-Con

Blair and the neo-cons rushed into each other's embrace. In his first interview after the U.S. elections, with *The Times* Nov. 5, Blair proclaimed that neo-cons are really not very different from "progressives" like himself. "When the Americans say we want to extend . . . democracy and human rights throughout the Middle East in the Greater Middle East Initiative, people say, well, that is part of the neo-conservative agenda. Actually, if you put it in different language, it is a progressive agenda," he told *The Times*.

In obnoxious language later repeated to European leaders in Brussels, Blair endorsed the dubious outcome of the U.S. elections. "Some people are in a sort of denial," he claimed. "The election has happened, America has spoken, the rest of the world should listen." He called the negative coverage of the election "quite unbelievable": "The suggestion almost that how can America go and vote for President Bush?"

The Bush-Cheney regime's reaction to Sept. 11—that is, launching war against Iraq—was a "reflective and considered view," Blair said, which he fully endorsed. It should be debated, "rather than condemning people who take that view as either liars, warmongers, or idiots." The proclaimed election result is an opportunity, Blair said, to renew an "immensely strong" relationship with Bush-Cheney's America.

In mid-October, none other than Richard Perle of the American Enterprise Institute said on BBC's "Panorama" program: "I think Tony Blair's moral sense is very much reflected in the thinking of many neo-conservatives. I suppose he'd be horrified to hear that, especially since the term neo-conservative is so abused. But his sense that it was right to liberate Iraq, is the sense of neo-conservatives and was not the view of most foreign offices, including probably his own."

William Kristol, neo-con chairman of the Project for a New American Century and publisher of the *Weekly Standard*, said to "Panorama": "Tony Blair does have a fundamental understanding of this: That for justice and liberty to prevail in the world, force sometimes has to be used. It's very nice to sit around and say we're in Europe, and we believe in the rule of law, we believe in the United Nations, but Saddam Hussein



Tony Blair and George Bush at their press conference in Washington on Nov. 12. Blair and the neo-con warmongers' mutual embrace gives a more realistic indication of what Blair's "progressive democracy" has in store for Israel and Palestine.

is there, and he's a dictator and he has weapons of mass destruction.

"And are you going to do something about it or not, and in so far as Tony Blair's answer was 'yes' . . . even if the rest of the UN security council doesn't agree with us, I think Tony Blair is a kind of neo-conservative, despite himself." Another neo-con, Hudson Institute Fellow Irwin Stelzer, also embraced Blair as a fellow neo-con, in an interview on BBC's Radio 4, Oct. 18.

'Opportunity' for Austerity

Blair has been hyping the fascist economics behind his "progressive" policies since the British political season began in September. On Oct. 10, he proclaimed his concept of an "Opportunity Society" in a big speech to the London Institute for Public Policy Research. Blair had already begun preaching about "the opportunity society" in his Sept. 28 "I'm not sorry about the Iraq war" speech at the Labour Party annual conference.

Waxing more evangelical by the minute, Blair told the Institute of his "grand visions and great causes": a demand that a "true opportunity society" replace the "traditional welfare state." This means to "alter fundamentally the contract between citizen and state at the heart of that 20th Century settlement; to move from a welfare state that relieves poverty and provides basic services to one which offers high-quality services and the opportunity for all to fulfill their potential to the full."

In other words: ever-more austerity. Britain allegedly has a high employment rate; in reality, most jobs are dependent

upon the huge, and very vulnerable, financial sector, while industry is shutting down. Millions of hidden unemployed rely on health-incapacity benefits so that they can continue to eat. There is a £57 billion "black hole" in British pension funds, and personal debt is over £1 trillion: 120% of disposable income.

Blair proposed to make all this worse. He wants to ruin the already weak National Health System by "entrench[ing] choice"; get people "trapped on Incapacity Benefit" to return to work, and use the money to help bail out the failing pension funds. Finally, Blair wants a "lifelong learning" policy, which will be "central to our pensions policy" because it will "enable more older people in their 50s and 60s to acquire the skills and opportunities to remain in work"—because their pensions are not going to be there when they retire!

A Very Hard Place

Despite his embrace of the neo-cons, Blair must know he is in a hard place. He has always tried to play the politically "softer" option, attempting to maneuver the UN Security Council to support the war, and to get Vice President Dick Cheney to present a more measured face to the world—although the end-goal was, and is, always the same.

Blair's hold on power results from the lack of effective opposition at home, and the across-the-board compromising of European leaders with the perceived American election results. Britain is now set to hold national elections on May 5, 2005—although that date can be changed. By then, anything could happen.

"The U.S. Presidential elections were a 'no win' for Tony

Blair, whoever won,” one knowledgeable observer of British politics told *EIR* Nov. 9. “If John Kerry had won, there would have been an effort to get rid of all those involved in the Iraq war, and there would have been a lot of pressure on Blair. But Bush won, and Blair will now have to carry the albatross of Bush and Iraq around his neck into the coming British elections. Blair’s continued propitiation of Bush, who is widely despised in Britain, will demoralize the Labour Party workers who have to get out the vote in the election, and there could be many Labour seats lost.”

Before the election, when Downing Street was trying to hedge its bets on the real possibility of a Kerry victory, Blair’s former “spin doctor” and New Labour guru Alastair Campbell told BBC Radio 4 on Nov. 2: “The reality is—there is no point in denying this—that Tony has taken a big political hit as a result of what is perceived to be a strong relationship with President Bush.”

Blair went to Washington with demands that he come back with “concrete demonstration of the benefits of his close ties to George Bush,” the political observer said. Most urgent would be a fresh peace initiative between Israel and Palestine. But, as a well-placed British Mideast expert said after Blair’s return, “Blair got nothing in Washington.”

Blair himself had declared Israel-Palestine *the* issue, when he called George Bush with congratulations even before the results were final. “I have long argued that the need to revitalize the Middle East peace process is the single most pressing political challenge in our world today,” Blair later described his message to Bush. Before he flew off for his “face-to-face time” (the two have regular video sessions) with Bush, he told the British Parliament, “I will do everything I can to make sure that this peace process becomes reinvigorated.”

Immediately, the New Labour apparatus made it clear that little of substance would happen. Alastair Campbell went on television Nov. 8, to say that “it would be unrealistic to expect concrete results from a summit such as this.” Blair was hoping for a “signal of intent” from Bush, a Downing Street spokesman stated Nov. 8, after admitting that efforts for Israeli-Palestinian peace have “lost momentum. . . . The priority is to restore that momentum—it is important to get a signal of intent.”

Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell, herself recently embarrassed by widespread opposition to Blair’s plans to revive the British economy by allowing U.S. “super casinos” to move into the country, admitted that the re-election of Bush caused much disappointment in the Labour Party, but said Blair should put his “very strong alliance” with the President to “its best possible use.”

The day before Blair left, Downing Street was downplaying what could be accomplished. “There will be depth behind the signals of intent we can expect in Washington. But I am not sure how much will surface at this stage,” was the highly explicit statement of one No. 10 official. “I will be surprised

if we get a piece of paper we can wave,” said another. On the plane over, the BBC reported, aides were downplaying that there would be any real gains for Blair.

There certainly was intense “face-to-face” time: Blair and Bush met alone for dinner on Nov. 11. However, at their Nov. 12 joint press conference, Bush said absolutely nothing new. He set no timetable for establishing the two states of Israel and Palestine, and made no commitments to a new peace conference or a new U.S. special envoy. As to enforcement, Bush was clear where the pressure would be applied: the Palestinians “may decide to elect a real strong personality, but we’ll hold their feet to the fire to make sure that democracy prevails.” (See “Eye on Washington” column in this issue.)

The only refreshing note at the press conference, was when Bush was asked by a British journalist whether he regarded Blair as his “poodle,” and Blair had to tell Bush: “Don’t answer ‘yes’ to that question.”

On a more sombre note for Blair, was Bush’s warning of escalating violence in Iraq before the (scheduled) January elections: “As those elections draw near, the desperation of the killers will grow and the violence could escalate.” Asked for his reaction later, Blair told British journalists that it had “passed me by.”

British War Opposition Growing

Opposition to the Iraq war in Britain is now higher than ever. An opinion poll published in *The Times* Nov. 9, showed that just 31% of people—down from 33% last month—consider the war right, while 57% considered the war wrong, up from 53% in October. On Nov. 16, *The Independent* reported that British military leaders want the Black Watch regiment withdrawn from central Iraq at latest by the beginning of December. (Just before the U.S. Presidential elections, the famous Black Watch was sent to the Fallujah area from the relatively quieter south, to support U.S. operations. Reaction was intense in Britain. See *EIR*, Nov. 19.)

Chief of Britain’s Defense Staff, Gen. Sir Mike Walker, has already told U.S. military in Iraq that keeping the British forces in central Iraq “would be a political decision and militarily irresponsible,” according to “senior defence sources” cited by *The Independent*. The plan is to withdraw the Black Watch as soon as the Fallujah operation is over, or when the battle group’s 30-day deployment ends on Dec. 3—“whichever is sooner.” Britain will not support further U.S. Fallujah-type offensives.

Blair has promised in Parliament that the Black Watch would be home by Christmas, which the military said “surprised” them, and put constraints on British operations in Basra. The Black Watch is deployed just south of Fallujah, to plug a hole in the U.S. deployment. A senior British military source said: “There was a need to fill the vacuum, and this will continue to be the case. Other forces will be needed in the future, but it won’t be us.”