

ANTI WAR PROTESTS



Of course it was important that over half of backbench Labour MP's voted against a war on Iraq. It means that the government only has half a mandate to go in to Iraq, and no plan at all about how to get out. This is of critical importance as the campaign momentum moves away from parliament and back into the wider social movements.

The pace of events changes rapidly. In the space between writing this article and its publication the war may be over. None of this will change the fundamentals we will have to return to. The war on Iraq will still have been illegal and immoral. Twisting the terms of UN resolutions to suit ourselves will open a Pandora's Box when other countries choose to do the same for wars of their own convenience.

By far the greatest threat to the international rule of law now comes from the Bush administration. We are faced not just with US unilateralism, but a view of 'pre-emptive self-defence' that effectively assumes a right to bomb, assassinate or invade whoever the Bush administration chooses.

Victory over Iraq will no doubt be celebrated as an act of national liberation. If it is achieved with minimal casualties on both sides we will have much to be thankful for. One way or another, the sons and daughters who die in such wars are never the ones responsible for the war itself. But we must be careful not to allow a 'victory' to serve as vindication for wars of aggression and military adventurism.

There are many tyrants and criminals running countries around the world who violate human rights and UN resolutions. This does not give anyone the right to bomb and invade them. If it did, Ariel Sharon would have been in deep trouble long ago. The example of how differently Israeli breaches of UN Resolutions have been treated from those of Iraq, highlights the inconsistency gap that the UN has to address. It cannot be acceptable for the world to have different rules for America's friends than for their adversaries.

Post-war Iraq could easily become America's next Vietnam. This is one of the prospects that the anti-war movement has to think through. Victory over Iraq will be packaged alongside the 'successes' of Kosovo and Afghanistan. Look carefully before you get too excited. Kosovo has been ethnically cleansed of Serbs and is run by the Albanian mafia. Government of Afghanistan is limited to metropolitan Kabul, and the rest has returned to the warlords. Al Qaida has a radio station in Afghanistan and in 5 of their border posts with Pakistan American troops have had to withdraw because of attacks from Taliban fighters.

Iraq will be different. The US will have to occupy the country just to get the oil out. Every liberation movement and fundamentalist group will take pot shots at them in the process. British troops, caught in the crossfire, will soon find a British public demanding that we 'bring the boys home'.

Domestically, the first strike of the war effort will have been on the right to strike. Emergency legislation to ban a fire-fighters strike will provoke fury across the trade union movement. Every union leader in

the land knows that emergency legislation has a habit of staying in place. It is the first step towards a ban on public sector strikes in general (and a preparation for further transfer of public services into private hands). American corporations may have all the contracts for post-war reconstruction in Iraq, but they are no less excited about the profits to be found in post-war deconstruction of Britain's public services.

Meanwhile someone will decide it would be a good idea to criminalise the kids as part of the war effort. National leaders may have moaned about political apathy amongst the young, but they never wanted a youth movement that would challenge their right to go to war. Anti-war protests will be re-branded either a simple truancy or as anarchic and destructive. Demands will go out - parents must be fined, pupils excluded, order must be restored.

None of this will go through unchallenged. The worldwide anti-war movement has a momentum that is not only anti-war, but which challenges the greed that drives the war agenda. It has found a confidence to challenge US and corporate power where national parliaments have lost the will to do so. The New York Times recently said there are now two global superpowers. One is the US administration and the other, the worldwide anti-war movement.

The battle for Labour's heart and soul will be determined by whether we can connect with these wide and diverse social movements. Labour cannot take ownership of this movement (and nor should we) but we can give it an important interface. Engage with this movement and we can give it a parliamentary and political platform to speak from. Engage with it and we give political meaning back to the Labour Party.

At a time when there is much to fear and much to rail against, there is also a moment to grasp. Seize it and we can rescue the future from the hands (and weapons) of the Bush (mal) administration. Do nothing, and the future - war strewn and battered - will be theirs.