COMMENTARY

War and democracy

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Whether they welcomed the prospect of the 'new' world order it would suppos-
edly inaugurate, or were appalled by its imperial ambitions and the disasters
it would unleash, few can have doubted the historic import of the decision
to go to war with Iraq. Those who have committed the globe to this aggression may
have done so in philistine disregard of the past, but its impact in shaping the future will
be immense, and its economic, political and ecological consequences will resonate for
decades to come. This makes it reasonable to reflect on its democratic credentials, all
the more so given that it was trumpeted in the name of a 'democracy' on which it never
intended to deliver, and in defiance of overwhelming international opposition.

One analyst who has reflected long on the first point is Milan Rai. He argues con-
vincingly that the very narrow US definition of the 'regime' (Saddam Hussein and
family), the coup-centred war plan, and the early assassination attempt, all indicate that
the aim was not to empower the Iraqi people but rather to stimulate a military uprising
that would topple the dictator and his immediate circle but would leave the rest of the
security system intact.[1] The aim, in short, was regime stabilization rather than change.
As late as March this year, a US official in *Newsweek* shocked human rights activists
by claiming that the bias 'would be toward forgiving as much of the past as possible';
in other words, most of the crimes that had been used to drum up war fever in the
West were 'to be forgiven'. The planned coup failed to evolve, and the invading forces
have ended up killing or dispersing more of the future 'stabilizing' personnel than they
intended. The war plan has therefore only succeeded in part: Saddam Hussein has gone,
but the regime remains extremely unstable. Because of this, the USA may, paradoxic-
ally, end up having to concede a little more in the way of participation than it originally
wanted. (But whatever arrangements get made, one thing looks certain: they will be by
the boys for the boys.)

As far as the elitism of the decision to go to war is concerned, we know that this
was taken without UN endorsement, despite a historically unprecedented degree of
dissent in both Europe and the USA, and against the wishes of the majority of the
electorate even in those countries whose governments supported it and were to become
militarily involved (notably the UK). It was a decision made without public consultation
or concern for accountability, long before any of the rituals designed to lend it a veneer
of legitimacy (renewed and 'failed' arms inspection, the processes of UN and national
parliamentary debate and mandate) were entered upon.

There are, however, some qualifications to this picture of global disempowerment.
There is the fact that the Bush administration, despite high levels of opposition, did
indeed have (and still enjoys) extensive backing from its electorate for its war efforts.
How far one can count this as a democratic mandate is disputable, given the dubious
quality of Bush's election in the first place (without which war might never have
become an option), and its contingency upon the highly specific and in many respects
distorting impact of 9/11 on public perceptions of threat. That electoral judgements
were based on very partial information is indicated by surveys showing that 42 per
cent of the American public believes that Saddam Hussein is directly responsible for

the September 11 attacks, and 55 per cent that he supports al-Qaida. Still, there is no disputing the scale of enthusiasm for the war in the US itself.

From a differing point of view, we should also factor in the restraining impact of the huge opposition to the war. This placed considerable difficulties in the way of its smooth pursuit, and there will clearly be consequences for those governments who have ignored the strength of public hostility to it. The UN proved more of an obstacle to American plans than many had foreseen, exposing the limitations of any argument to the effect that it is simply a rubber stamp for US foreign policy. Popular resistance in Turkey proved a serious stumbling block to the implementation of the 'ideal' US war plan, and it will be a complicating factor in the management of postwar Iraq. In Germany, the opposition of the Social Democrats to the war has been hugely popular and reinforced the party's standing with the electorate. In Spain, where Aznar went against the wishes of 90 per cent of voters, he will almost certainly have to pay the political price by ceding power to the socialists at the next election. So too may Berlusconi, given the nearly comparable opposition to the war in Italy. In the UK, the strength of the anti-war movement forced the Ministry of Defence, on the eve of the parliamentary debate, into making panicked contingency plans for Blair's resignation and the disengagement of British troops from the invasion. And even though dissent was quelled in the Commons, and there has been a surge in public support for war since the beginning of hostilities, New Labour may still reap a bitter electoral harvest from their agreement to go to war.

What does democracy mean?

These considerations illustrate the complexities surrounding any invocation of democracy in a context such as this. The very high level of US support for war raises important issues, for example about the relationship between knowledge and democracy, or, to be more precise, about the extent to which votes corresponding to professed, though profoundly ill-informed, wishes can (or should) count as a genuine exercise of democracy. Clearly, democracy means nothing unless it allows individuals to express their own subjective wishes rather than those others might wish them to wish. On the other hand, since knowledge, or belief based on it, plays so critical a role in the determination of the will, democracy is imperilled whenever significant numbers cast their votes on the basis of seriously inaccurate, skewed or partial information. The range of argument brought into play by concerns of this kind is very extensive, and by no means confined in its application to the conflict in Iraq. But the intensification of propaganda, the control of the media, especially in the USA, and the notoriously accident-prone nature of truth in times of war, bring these questions into very sharp focus.

The question of the autonomy of the UN Security Council also presents its complexities, though at a somewhat less abstract level.[2] On the one hand there is no doubting the degree to which on this, as on so many issues in the past, the UN has been either made to serve American interests, or disregarded if it stands against them. As the quest continues for the elusive weapons of mass destruction (now rapidly coming to figure as a conveniently mobile *casus belli*), even the ever temperate Blix has made clear his frustrations. Few can doubt now, in the aftermath of conflict, that the UN 'vital' role in Iraq will be as lively as the US administration chooses to permit. Nor in the run-up to the war did anyone seriously believe that the 'coalition of the willing', whose countries include some of the most debt-ridden in the world, was anything but a creature of US economic bullying and its blatant manipulation of aid packages. It is clear that not one of the smaller countries was able to operate free of this duress, and to a greater or lesser extent this has also been true in the case of the more significant players.

On the other hand, those who insisted (like Tariq Ali in February's *Red Pepper*) that the Security Council was bound to green-light the invasion have certainly been proved wrong. How much should one read into this? Should we hail the resistance to a second resolution as a victory for some kind of democratic accountability against

the unilateralism of the Bush–Blair alliance? Only in the most limited sense. Let us not forget that the privileged status of the 'gang of five' in the Security Council is hardly a compelling model of international parity, and the UN is in this sense a grossly undemocratic institution. One needs, too, to temper any enthusiasm for 'old' European dissidence with a large dose of realpolitik. The peace marchers' banners ('Vive la France!', 'Blessed are the cheesemakers') may have sung the praises of the French, and the Germans may now be advocating 'd'accord' in place of 'OK' and 'tricot' instead of 'T-shirt'. Yet the rationale for the French and Russian vetos was hardly very principled, much of it being compromised by commercial considerations and a reflex anti-Americanism. Nor has one's faith in French political sophistication been greatly enhanced by polls during the war showing one in four backing the Ba'ath regime. But charges of economic compromise are always double-edged and can be pressed both ways. Chirac was denounced for vetoing the war because of French interests in Iraq by a Bush–Blair team that had shown no compunction about buying the votes of a score of other nations.

Of more significance to an assessment of the relative autonomy of the UN as a counter to US hegemony are two further factors. One is the confusion and division that appear to reign still in Washington on whether to invoke or repudiate UN authority. This has been very evident in the fact that the key hawks in the Bush administration who are now, post-bellum, insisting on the anachronism and irrelevance of the UN were the same who justified the war precisely because the resolutions of this outdated international institution were being flouted by the Iraqi regime. The obvious answer to this is that UN authority (like the Geneva Convention) is invoked when it suits and not when it does not. But an authority that is overall derided cannot continue indefinitely to provide endorsement as the occasion demands. To the extent that the USA has conducted the war and will manage the peace in defiance of the UN, it must forfeit all claims to legitimacy save those that derive from the rightness of its own might. From a dialectical point of view, this is not a very comfortable or secure, or even necessarily a very powerful, position for the USA to be in over the long term. The discomforts of isolationism might be reinforced were the UN over time demo-cratically to reform itself.

It is here that we might bring in the other factor: the multiple levels of interaction between governments and their electorates. This has been especially evident recently in the case of Russia, France and Germany, where governments that were very much in tune with their publics in opposing the war, and basked in popular plaudits for being so, are now busily mending the diplomatic fences and seeking to find some accommodation with the 'coalition' forces. The dialectic here is thickly pleated. The reasons for the rap-prochement are in part geopolitical. Deeply opposed as they have been throughout to any plans to replace the Ba'ath regime by a US protectorate, these are nations that are understandably keen to have their say in any discussions influencing the future

of Iraq, and in particular to see the UN playing the major role in the process of political reformation. But there are also powerful economic reasons propelling those who opposed the war to renew the dialogue with its perpetrators, and these are indicative of the limits placed by a deregulated global market economy on the autonomy of national politics.

It is here that we can locate the most fundamental obstacle to the realization of any democratically mandated alternative to the bellicose politics of the 'new world order', whether it seeks to develop a base in 'old' Europe or anywhere else. This is not simply because governments are subservient to the elite, and admittedly greedily self-seeking, interests of transnational company directors, but because this subservience is so thoroughly tied up with the consumer and investment interests of the electorates upon whom they themselves depend for power. The economic duress to which governments capitulate, reluctantly doing business with very unpopular agencies and processes (the furore around the US use of Shannon airport in the supposedly neutral Republic of Ireland would be an obvious case in point) testifies not simply to the way in which 'they' defy their publics politically, but also to the compulsion of the economic agendas upon which their publics expect them to deliver.

It is here that the calls for those opposed to the war to give up driving their motor cars, naive as they obviously are in many respects, have a certain logic about them – in that they bring into focus the intimate connection between affluent consumer expectations and the politics of aggression, whether in the form of economic pressures or through recourse to military means. And unless the peace movements are prepared more directly to acknowledge and campaign around that connection, then their protest, however ardent at the time, is likely to make little headway against the countering dynamic of the military–industrial system sustained by the mainstream parties. Resistance to war has to be yoked to an ongoing and altogether more muscular, forward-looking and positive mode of campaigning. This should be designed, in the first instance, to ensure that a compelling image of an 'alternative world order' everywhere shadows, and wherever possible directly confronts and fuels, resistance to that 'old–new' one imposed under American dominance. In the second instance – and this applies with particular urgency to the situation in Britain at the present time – it must seek to provide those committed to an alternative of this kind with a fairer representation in the arena of official politics.

Time to regroup?

In pressing for this in Britain at the present time, it is important to keep in mind that opposition to the conflict even now remains extensive, that the decisive vote for war did not represent the wishes of two-thirds of the people, and that it only came about because many MPs directly flouted the wishes of their constituents. This raises two questions, one about the accountability of MPs, the other concerning the 'democracy' of the behaviour of those MPs who voted against the war but who have retained the Labour whip. On the first count, it might be said that this is a perennial issue of representational government. MPs, it will be argued, have a pastoral as well as a representative role; they should be guiding public opinion as well as listening to it. They have, in other words, been elected with an agreement, tacit though it may be, that there will be occasions when they feel the need to vote on principle and according to their own lights, rather than in deference to what the voters want. Unfortunately, although persuasive on such issues as capital punishment, it cannot be in the present instance where it is starkly obvious that the Labour MPs in question were looking more to protect the prime minister and the stability of the Labour Party than they were to the rights and wrongs of perpetrating an illegal and devastating war. Better pastoral guidance was provided by schoolchildren at the anti-war rallies than by many of our New Labour MPs.

On the second count, it does indeed now seem difficult to endorse the retention of the Labour whip by MPs who voted against the war and have since campaigned

against it, at times expressing themselves very polemically at the various anti-war demonstrations. They themselves, no doubt, will argue that they remain an altogether more effective influence by remaining with New Labour. Why, then, we have to ask, was the opposition they did offer from this favoured position so little and so late? Why did they prove so feeble in what should have been the moment of their ascendancy? Given how precarious Blair's position came to be on the eve of the critical vote in the Commons, and the impact his resignation might have had on Bush's options, there was surely more of a responsibility to themselves, the electorate, and indeed the world at large, than they managed to discharge. Nor in truth can they claim to have been very loud over the years in their canvassing against the party's militarism: its policies on the renewal of Trident, the continued presence of American bases, and the arms trade.

Perhaps, then, as some, including myself, have recently been arguing, the time has finally come to regroup, to make a definitive break with New Labour, and to work for a political formation that can better respond to the needs of the newly mobilized youth against the war, and of all those who are motivated by a vision of an alternative order of global coexistence, and have felt so acutely their disenfranchisement over recent weeks. This, at any rate, is the stance adopted by the recently launched 'Start the Peace' initiative, which aims to use electoral politics as a focus for a positive long-term project. Its strategy is threefold: (1) to ensure that in forthcoming local, European and parliamentary elections, New Labour pays the maximum political price for taking Britain into the war with Iraq; (2) to encourage anti-war coalitions to organize locally in support of parties who have opposed the war and seek the elimination of British weapons of mass destruction and the closure of US bases here; (3) to build a new political formation committed to anti-militarism, social and global justice, and sustainability.[3]

If it succeeds, this project may in places advantage the Conservatives, given the British electoral system (which New Labour decided not to change). The arithmetic certainly gives disproportionate influence to any anti-militarist candidate winning significant support: defection of even a small proportion of Labour voters to, say, the Green Party, the Socialist Alliance or the nationalist parties, puts some Labour MPs at risk. But any Labour MP who intends to canvass anti-war votes in 2005/6 should resign the Labour whip now and seek backing to stand as an Independent Labour candidate next time round. Nothing, in any case, would more help what remains of the Left inside Labour than a serious anti-war electoral challenge outside. As for the danger of helping the Conservatives, this is a nettle that has now to be grasped. Moments to check the current drift towards a de-democratizing of American-style clientele politics have been few and far between. This is one to seize.

Notes

1. See Milan Rai's analysis in 'Partial Victories', *Arrow Anti-War Briefing* 42, 11 April 2003, and the extended treatment in his book *War Plan Iraq: Ten Reasons Against the War on Iraq*, Verso, London, 2002. (Briefings can be downloaded from the ARROW website www.j-n-v.org.)
2. In this connection, see the interesting and wide-ranging debate on cosmopolitanism between Bruce Robbins and David Chandler in recent issues of *Radical Philosophy* (Bruce Robbins, 'What's Left of Cosmopolitanism?' *RP* 116, November/December 2002, pp. 30–37; David Chandler, 'The Cosmopolitan Paradox: Response to Robbins', Bruce Robbins, 'Reply to Chandler', both in *RP* 118, March/April 2003, pp. 25–30 and 31–2, respectively). On the specific issue of war in Iraq and the UN role, see Perry Anderson, 'Casuistries of Peace and War', *London Review of Books*, 6 March 2003, pp. 12–13.
3. 'Start the Peace' is not an organization, but is designed to foster discussion on the issues outlined above. For more information on the initiative, see the April issue of *Red Pepper*, or join the discussion list at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/startpeace.