

Vote shrewdly against war and climate change

Tim Root puts the case for tactical voting

At the election there is a good chance of a hung parliament, in which the Lib Dems will push a fairer voting system as the price of their backing for any other measures. A fairer system would lead to the emergence of a large genuine socialist party. It and the Greens would both become credible contenders with enough MPs to influence parliamentary decisions. If Labour had faced such competitors during the past 13 years this would have made a huge difference. Labour would not have had sole power, and needing votes of socialist and Green MPs it would not have been able to preside over a growth in inequality. It would not have neglected housing so severely, nor cut taxes to accumulate the current prohibitive level of government debt. Therefore this is a good time to review Labour's performance since 1997, and consider our options at the election. This article will discuss two of the most important issues parliament faced, Iraq and climate change.

In September 2002, over six months before the crucial Commons vote on the planned war, nine out of every ten Labour MPs surveyed were opposed to it. It is hard to understand how they weighed up their subsequent actions on the issue. Maybe they had the same mindset as the cabinet, whose overriding concern regarding Iraq, according to Robin Cook, was to remain united behind Blair, and thus avoid a leadership crisis.

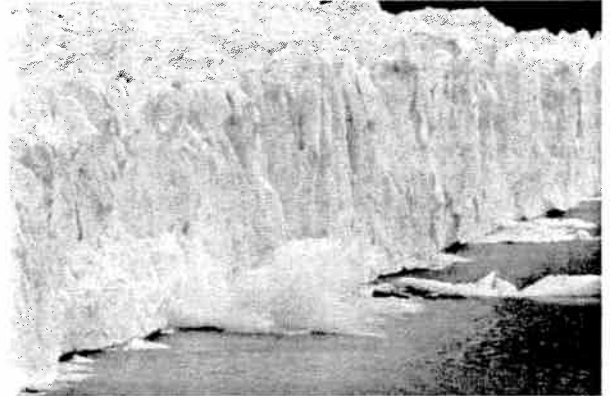
There was plenty of time in the build-up to war for Labour MPs to consider the evidence. In mid-August 2002 the *Times* had a front page story on Robin Cook's private opposition to the planned war. Mo Mowlam had an article in the *Guardian* in September 2002, asserting that the real motive for the war was oil. As early as June 2000 the former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter had said that 'Iraq no longer possessed any meaningful quantities of chemical or biological agent'.

In July 2002 he stated that virtually all of these substances Iraq had possessed would have degraded beyond use due to the passage of time. There were no grounds to suspect him of bias, being normally a conservative supporter of the US Republican Party. The fact that the real aim of the war was regime change had been shown by the 1998 report of the Project for the New American Century founded by Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and their associates, which proposed deposing Saddam Hussein in order to attain 'a substantial American force presence in the Gulf'. This was mentioned in the November 2002 Commons debate by Simon Thomas of Plaid Cymru, and in a *New Statesman* article that December.

At the Labour Party conference in September 2002, the majority of the trade union vote was against the war. Mark Seddon tried at three meetings, the first in September 2002, to get Labour's National Executive (NEC) to pass a motion opposing Britain's involvement in an attack on Iraq unless explicitly backed by the United Nations. However he was supported by only three of the other 29 NEC members, of whom only one was an MP. Only five Labour MPs were listed as supporters of the large Stop the War demonstration that September, despite there being plenty of other Labour backing for it, including the party's former general secretary.

The Blair magic

Although in the final vote a few days before the war 139 of Labour's 266 backbench MPs voted against war, very few sought the type of publicity at an earlier stage which could have dissuaded the cabinet from backing Blair. In a vital parliamentary vote on the war plan on 26/2/03, three weeks before the final vote, three former Labour government ministers voted against war, but less than half



Vote to stop this...



...and this

the party's backbenchers did so.

Sadly Labour MPs' priority, to believe in the Blair magic which had delivered two election victories, meant that most of them could not resist the leadership's pressure to back the war. The whips deployed 'every technique of persuasion available', as Robin Cook put it. This is well illustrated in Chris Mullin's diaries. The whips told him, and doubtless all the other MPs they were coercing, that the Tories might abstain and therefore the government might lose the vote on the war. This could have led to a general election. MPs were also faced with serious concerns that a large Labour rebellion could cause Blair to resign as leader. Parliamentary Labour Party chair Jean Corston had decided on the afternoon of the vote to oppose the war but later succumbed to Blair's personal plea. Most Labour MPs were astonish-

ingly submissive towards the government on Iraq. It was known that the US was reluctant to attack Iraq without British support. If Labour MPs had asserted themselves, they might have stopped the war. Blair would probably have backed down if a majority of his MPs had opposed the war, or he would have been replaced as leader.

A 2006 study, using methodology commended by the Ministry of Defence's chief scientific adviser, estimated that 650,000 Iraqi civilians had died due to the war and the havoc it unleashed. The war stimulated Jihadists to attack Madrid in March 2004 and London on 7 July 2005. These tragedies could have been prevented if Labour MPs had been responsive to opinion in the party and the country.

The most important figure whose opposition could have prevented the war was Gordon Brown. His close ally Nick Brown told Chris Mullin in September 2002 that Gordon was against war on Iraq. However Gordon chose to prioritise his personal ambition and did nothing to hamper the war plans. Chief Whip Hilary Armstrong told Gordon that Blair was 'more likely to anoint him' as successor if he followed Blair's line on Iraq, and 'once that point had been grasped Gordon played his part to perfection'. How can we trust him, or the party that appointed him without even an election?

Tony Blair described climate change as 'a challenge so far-reaching in its impact and irreversible in its destructive power'. Gordon Brown has said that overcoming the 'climate change crisis ... must be the great project of this generation.' Yet neither gave

the issue anything like this degree of priority. Britain is going to hit its Kyoto CO₂ reduction target only due to industry's 'dash for gas' following the run-down of the coal industry in the early 1990's. Labour set itself a target of a 20% CO₂ cut by 2010, which it will miss by a large margin. Despite having the best position for wind energy in the whole of Europe, the percentage of electricity we generate from renewables is nearly the lowest in the European Union. Five and a half million of our homes are poorly insulated. The proportion of revenue raised from green taxes has actually declined under Labour. With such a woeful domestic performance, any attempts to influence other countries to prioritise the issue were hardly likely to succeed.

Failed to stand up

Again, Labour MPs largely failed to stand up to the government on this issue. Only 28 voted against the third runway at Heathrow. This is despite MPs knowing that emissions from planes cause 2.7 times the global warming effect as the same emissions at ground level, and that if aviation continues to expand as it had been doing before the recession, in a few decades it would take up all the CO₂ we could safely emit. In February parliament voted on an amendment to the Energy Bill to allow a future government the choice to impose emissions limits on power stations. All the opposition parties voted for this, but only 27 Labour MPs did.

There is no earthly reason why socialists should care less about climate change than the other

parties. Up to now most of the victims of climate change have been in the developing world. Labour has increased overseas aid, so it is completely inconsistent for it to be so complacent about climate change.

Clearly to avoid a Tory victory it is important that Labour retains seats in which it faces a Tory challenge. However we have the best chance of getting a government to prioritise climate change, and avoid unnecessary wars, if Labour does not win an overall majority. Therefore we need to back the Lib Dems, Greens, or Nationalists in any seat where they have a real chance. Whatever the Lib Dems' shortcomings, they have long had the strongest commitment of the three main parties to tackle climate change. They also helped boost opposition to the Iraq War. If they hold the balance of power, we should be able to gain an honest electoral system in which it is worth voting for the true candidate of our choice.

Labour's strategy of triangulation to try and capture Tory votes has disenfranchised the millions to the left of Labour. But with proportional representation (PR), their votes would count. Safe seats would end. Each MP would know they could be replaced at the next election if they lost their constituents' confidence. They would become far more responsive to citizens' campaigns. And a PR system which enabled electors, not party bosses, to rate candidates on a party list, would maximise voters' control. An opportunity like this comes along very rarely; seize it!

Email:
tim@timroot.net

There is a referenced version of this article at [www.timroot.net](http://www.timroot.net/?q=articles) /?q=articles
Tim Root is a climate change activist, and author of *Love, Empowerment, and Social Justice: Personal Relationships and Citizen Action* (Open Gate Press, 2005)



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