

THE MAN UPON THE STAIR



I met a man upon the stair
A little man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh how I wish he'd go away

Ogden Nash's poem wasn't written about the Parliamentary Labour Party's meeting that I had just come out of, but the words kept running through my head.

In what came over as an infantile gesture, MPs who raised the issue of Iraq were jeered by their colleagues. It was a mood of desperate denial; a feeling that if only the dissenters would shut up, the issue of the war would go away.

The Prime Minister himself was no less keen for a shift of focus. He wanted MPs to concentrate on how to defeat the terrorists and suicide

bombers who stood in the way of the 'freedom' US and British troops had brought to Iraq. Sadly, the present is as self-deceiving as the past.

We stand on the edge of a massive US military bombardment of Iraqi cities that resist the occupation. It follows the US attacks on Fallujah earlier in the year, in which over 600 civilians were killed. Even official Iraqi figures now confirm that over two thirds of the 15,000 or more Iraqi deaths during the occupation have been at the hands of coalition forces. The next onslaught will merely add to these numbers, creating as many new insurgents as it does civilian corpses.

The \$25 million offered for the killing or capture of Al-Zarqawi has produced no response. So the bombs will rain in instead. Whole areas of cities will be flattened in the collective punishment of Iraqis who fail to cooperate with (or capitulate to) the occupation. This is pacification not a peace process.

Bombing whole areas in pursuit of insurgents is seen by Iraqis in the same light as bombing the whole of their country in pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Yet in the face of such civilian slaughter, the international community remains stubbornly silent.

The present, as much as the past, is based on the military pursuit of a lie.

The British parliament is repeatedly asked to focus on the January elections as an expression of Iraq's transformation from dictatorship to democracy. Debates hinge around how much of Iraq will be able to take part in the elections, yet no one asks what they will achieve. Even if every Iraqi took part, they would not end up with a democratically elected government. The elections will merely deliver an Assembly to draw up a constitution. The country will continue to be governed by the US government, through their imposed administration under Ayad Allawi.

No party that opposes the occupation will be allowed to stand, even in the elections for the Constitutional Assembly. The demonisation of Muqtada al Sadr, who - like him or not - represents a

sizeable proportion of Iraqi opinion opposed to the occupation, makes it clear that the Bush administration is only interested in a democracy of the faithful and the compliant.

British troops are now being asked to move into areas occupied by American forces so that the US can open up its new military offensive in a war that masquerades as a peace. The political grounds for doing so are highly dubious. Many seem more closely related to a Bush re-election process than an Iraqi peace process.

Bush's financial backers are also those with the lion's share of Iraqi reconstruction contracts. They make as much money out of the bombing of Iraq as out of its rebuilding. They depend almost as much on a post-war Iraq that will not dispute the transfer of Iraqi assets into the hands of US corporate multinationals.

As Bush struggles to fend off a late Kerry revival in the opinion polls, the bomb-or-bust strategy also plays to the perversity of the American electorate. Despite the burgeoning budget deficit, spiralling poverty, a reliance on McJobs and enormous climate change crises that are beginning to descend on them, Americans may yet vote for a cowboy they believe will 'stand tall against terrorism'.

Don't ask Europeans to explain this. Ask instead why we have anything to do with it. The urgent need is for a European/international initiative focused more broadly on a Middle East peace agenda. Britain could not lead this, partly because of our involvement in the military occupation of Iraq and partly because we can not bring ourselves to oppose US endorsement of Israel's treatment of Palestinians. But the Labour Party as a whole should not shrink from making the links that its leaders retreat from.

Back at home, parliament will be offered the distraction of a proposal to impeach the Prime Minister over the war on Iraq. Tempting as this may be for large numbers of Party members, it is an invitation to be resisted. The political coalition behind the move includes Tory MPs whose intention will be to see that the central charge is that of misleading parliament.

Parliament is big enough to take responsibility for its own actions rather than palm all the blame off onto the Prime Minister. Of course the dossiers on Iraq's WMD were a lie. Those of us who produced the counter-dossiers at the time, set out all the arguments MPs needed to understand the deception they were being asked to endorse. And MPs have to take responsibility for how they voted. But the Tory position is even more dishonest.

Time after time, Tory ministers have made it clear that they supported (and still support) the war. They remain untroubled by its illegality. They were even more gung-ho in support of Bush than Blair was. They would have backed a war if there was evidence of Saddam passing wind, let alone possessing WMD. The central issue about the war was, and is, its legality.

At the beginning of the summer I persuaded a different cross-party group of MPs to write to Kofi Annan, asking that the legality of the war be referred to the International Court of Justice. This is still the moral high ground that divides the anti-war movement from Bush's military adventurism. The argument is about justice and legality, not purge or personality.

Iraq is the man upon the stair. Neither military hardware nor moral duplicity will make him go away.

Only a combination of natural justice, economic self-determination and adherence to a framework of international law can do so. Bush and Blair know this...and so does the man upon the stair.

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