

the Liberal Democrat candidate overturned a huge Labour majority to gain the seat of Brent East in a by-election. Until a few years ago, the constituency was represented in parliament by Ken Livingstone, the present mayor of London, who was forced to leave the Labour Party because the leadership refused to endorse his candidacy. His success against the official Labour candidate for mayor offered the first tangible proof that Blair's party could fruitfully be challenged from the left.

To a certain extent, the Liberal Democrat upset makes the same point. Britain's third largest party is by no means a radical force, but Labour has drifted so far to the right that the Lib-Dems seem attractively social democratic in comparison. When Blair, in his conference speech, mocked the Liberal Democratic proposal to raise taxes for the richest Britons in order to fund university education, he didn't draw many cheers; as the prime minister must have known, at least half the people in the Bournemouth conference hall would have been only too pleased to adopt a similar plank.

Although the prospect of a free market in higher education alarms many Britons, the Brent East result is viewed more as an Iraq-related backlash.

Last February, at least 1.5 million people clogged the streets of London in an unprecedented protest against the impending war. Once the conflict was unleashed, a majority of Britons briefly lined up behind their government. Since the end of "major combat", they have been faced with mounting evidence that the Blair regime went to extraordinary lengths to exaggerate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein.

Extracts from former foreign secretary Robin Cook's diaries published earlier this week suggest that the prime minister was well aware that Baghdad was incapable of deploying any weapons of mass destruction at short notice. Cook, who resigned as leader of the House of Commons in protest against the government's determination to toe the White House line, also says debates over Iraq provoked

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(who may well be on his way out after his conduct was called into question during the Hutton inquiry into the death of defence ministry adviser David Kelly) and foreign secretary Jack Straw (who has echoed Washington in claiming, somewhat bizarrely, that the failure to find Saddam's weapons of mass destruction proves that it was right to go to war) were considerably more gun-ho.

Blair himself showed no contrition or remorse — and the contention that he respected the opinions of those who had opposed the war implied that he expected them to reciprocate. He trotted out the new standard line that what's done is done and Saddam's departure from the scene deserves to be celebrated.

The obvious problem with that approach is that it pre-emptively undermines future opposition to similarly misguided misadventures. Anyone who endorses, even retrospectively, this mode of regime change will run the risk of inconsistency in taking a contrary stand whenever the neo-conservative clique occupying the White House settles on its next target.

His government, Blair told the Labour conference, was out there on the side of George W. Bush "not because we're America's poodle" but because of the need to keep Britain safe. "It's not so much American unilateralism I fear," he went on. "It's isolation."

But the point, surely, is that if the United States is bent on defying world opinion and breaking international law, it deserves to be isolated rather than encouraged and abetted.

Many of Blair's critics within Labour ranks believe that he committed himself to Bush's aggression long before war resolutions came up before the House of Commons or the United Nations Security Council. They are almost certainly right.

This isn't, of course, a novel trend in British foreign policy.

although Blair's popularity ratings have lately been declining rather sharply, the main opposition Conservative Party remains unelectable for the time being. Yet, were a general election to be held today, Labour would find an absolute majority far

harder to achieve than it did in 1997 or 2001.

Were the decline to continue apace, chances are that Blair would encounter a much cooler reception at next year's party conference. In his speech, he was therefore hedging his bets more clearly than in recent years, tempering his Tory inclinations with invocations of traditional Labour values such as fairness and equity. He even broke a self-imposed taboo by mentioning the dreaded s-word: socialism. And with The Red Flag revived, on the insistence of unions and constituency parties, as a conference closer after a three-year hiatus, he displayed no qualms about intoning its unequivocal chorus: "Then raise the scarlet standard high/ Beneath its shade we'll live and die..."

At the same time, aware that he was addressing not just the party faithful but also the rest of the nation, towards the end of his oration, Blair summoned up the ghost of Maggie Thatcher, the predecessor he most closely resembles in a number of respects. Back in 1980, barely a year into her reign, the Iron Lady responded to calls for a policy U-turn by famously declaring at the Conservative conference: "You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning." In a conscious echo, the would-be Man of Steel said in Bournemouth last week: "I can only go one way. I've not got a reverse gear."

That sounds like a manufacturing defect. Besides, no one particularly wants the prime minister to head backwards. But there is concern, naturally enough, over his inclination to take a sharp right turn at every blind corner — not to mention his dangerous habit of tailgating a particularly reckless driver called Dubya.

Eventually Blair must be made to realize that you can't have your red flag and trample it too.

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