

NO RETURN TO BLAIR WARS - A REPLY TO OPEN LABOUR

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FOREWORD BY JEREMY CORBYN

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FOREWORD

Andrew Murray and Lindsey German have the benefit of a consistent and honest track record in opposition to war. They were part of the foundation group of the Stop the War Coalition in 2001 and have jointly written this pamphlet to ensure we do not descend into another bout of interventionism, and then pretend the consequences are nothing to do with the original military action.

Twenty years on from 2001, the death rate in Afghanistan still hovers around 10,000 per year. Once the sworn enemies of the West, the Taliban are now in negotiation with the government, yet the war drags on. Thousands of Afghan refugees from the conflict suffer abuse and humiliation all over the world.

The Iraq war, its lack of legal basis exposed by the Chilcot Report and the statement of Kofi Annan as UN General Secretary, still spawns fighting and yet more refugees.

The ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Libya killed thousands and a functioning country was reduced to warring parties in different areas.

The endless war in Syria has yet to bring any real peace to any community.

The camps of Lebanon, Jordan, Libya, Lesbos are a testament to the long-term victims of war.

There are beneficiaries of war.

Despite António Guterres’s demand for a global ceasefire as a way of dealing with COVID-19, it did not happen.

Almost \$300 billion of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and its allies over the past five years has not improved human rights there; or done anything but bring death and misery to the people of Yemen.

Any international policy for Britain must look at the world, as it is, and what problems it faces, and act to alleviate them, not exacerbate them.

Across the globe there are 70 million people who are counted as refugees: human beings, victims of war, human rights abuse and poverty. They want to survive and thrive, not be forever waiting for a food-truck.

Global poverty means food insecurity for millions, mainly in poorer countries.

The COVID-19 vaccine, now being rushed out in the fifty richest countries of the world, is barely available for equally vulnerable people in the poorer remainder of the world.

Surely an international strategy that is focused on these issues, not on pleasing the arms industry and shamefully ignoring the call for a global ban on nuclear weapons would actually help.

As this pamphlet explains, the tragedy of the illegal intervention in Iraq hangs like a pall over the Labour movement. A return to that strategy will bring more misery and more refugees and create the terrorists of tomorrow.

To achieve a genuinely international strategy needs concentration on green alternatives, a policy of removing the debt burden on the poorest and a conversion of arms industries to ensure those skills are used to alleviate poverty and suffering.

It must also support Black Lives Matter and the recalibration of our understanding of the reality of colonial history, and the attitudes it generated.

Consistency is also required in condemning human rights abuses and illegal occupations, wherever they occur.

The Stop the War Coalition has been a crucial and democratic voice for both peace and solidarity for the last twenty years. It has succeeded in changing the dial in so much public debate. Its future success will be an end to the idea that armed intervention accompanied by nationalistic rhetoric, greedy arms companies and a thirst for natural resources bring anything other than untold numbers of victims in their wake.

Jeremy Corbyn MP

January 2021

INTRODUCTION

For five years, the principles of Stop the War Coalition were articulated by the leader of the Labour Party. In some ways, this was a surprising development. After all, for years Stop the War's main actions and campaigns had been directed *against* the policies of a Labour government, above all over the Iraq War of 2003.

However, the depth and persistence of anti-war opinion, and the continuing strength of the anti-war movement resonated deep within the labour movement. It contributed to the decision of Ed Miliband to oppose air strikes against Syria in 2013, a position which led to the planned strikes being abandoned. And it certainly contributed to the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Leader in 2015, a decision made by a party membership desperate for an alternative to the New Labour politics of war and neo-liberalism.

In this pamphlet, we argue for the continuing salience of those policies amid indications that Corbyn's successor, Sir Keir Starmer, and his Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy, will look for ways to abandon them. Not only are the main lines of Stop the War's policies popular in the country, but they are also overwhelmingly popular among the Party membership. And the contemporary international situation makes them as relevant as ever, notwithstanding many changes in the world since our foundation in 2001.

The attack against Stop the War has been most recently expressed in a pamphlet published by Open Labour – *A Progressive Foreign Policy for New Times*. It was launched with the participation of Nandy, and subsequently endorsed by another member of Labour's foreign affairs front bench team. Its arguments aim at returning Labour to its worst mistakes of the past, all made under the heading of 'liberal intervention'.

Here we aim to briefly refute the main arguments of the Open Labour authors. We rebut the allegation that our opposition to regime change wars means alignment with the regimes targeted for removal; recall the actual record, behind the rhetoric, of the wars of intervention of the last thirty years; examine the recent changes in the world balance of power; defend the importance of anti-imperialism as a political orientation; expose the hypocrisy of the alternative advocated; and sum up the foreign policy choices facing the next Labour government.

We hope to ensure that the apparent course set by Starmer and Nandy does

not go uncontested. These issues should be debated throughout Constituency Labour Parties and the trade unions, as well as the Left and society more generally. This pamphlet is a contribution.

Lindsey German
Andrew Murray

January 2021

1. WHAT'S WRONG WITH 'CAMPIST' THEORY?

A common criticism of the Stop the War movement – and one repeated in Frederick Harry Pitts and Paul Thompson's pamphlet – is that its leaders are 'campist'. This means that opposition to Western imperialism and its actions is guided by support for another 'camp' of hostile foreign powers, or for anyone opposing the US and Britain.

This was a common accusation during the Cold War, when opponents of US foreign policy were invariably denounced as pro-Russian. Today its proponents still tend to locate Russia at the centre of this second 'camp', alongside its Middle East allies Syria, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah. It is also increasingly applied to China as the emerging economic and military rival to the US.

Pitts and Thompson argue that:

the dominant (though sometimes implicit) framing that drove Corbynism derived from anti-imperialist perspectives originally formed during the Cold War, national liberation struggles and opposition to repressive American interventions in South East Asia and Latin America in the 1960s and 70s. With the collapse of the Soviet block after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this binary 'two campism' posed the West against the Rest. However, anti-imperialism was reshaped and revitalised by military interventions, notably Iraq, influenced by the neo-conservative defence of US hegemony as the guarantor of an often somewhat shallow conception of liberal democracy.¹

The argument might find favour with columnists in Murdoch papers and right-wing Labour MPs, but it ignores two crucial points: that the anti-imperialist perspectives followed by many on the left over the past decades have been proved to be correct; and the alternatives to them promulgated by the right wing, which are now being recycled by those who want to move Labour away from any vestiges of Corbyn's policies on these questions, have been found wanting. It may have escaped the attention of Pitts and Thompson but the movements against apartheid, minority rule Rhodesia, the US war in Vietnam and more, have all been vindicated by events, and defenders of these abominations are rare indeed.*

* It was not always the case. The Federation of Conservative Students adopted the slogan "Hang Nelson Mandela" in the 1980s, and then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher opposed sanctions on the apartheid regime. See for a summary: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/dec/06/conservative-party-uncomfortable-nelson-mandela>

If we are going to see the aims of foreign policy as correcting injustices and human rights abuses perpetrated by governments and other state actors, as Pitts and Thompson appear to, then a modicum of honesty requires us to give credit to those who have campaigned tirelessly against such wrongs – of imprisonment, the death penalty, torture, lack of civil rights, war crimes against innocent civilians. This credit would tend to go disproportionately to those grassroots campaigns which the pamphlet holds are stuck in the past and to individuals – like Jeremy Corbyn – who have spoken up on a range of issues against a range of governments, criticising human rights abuses in Iran, supporting the Kurds, defending the rights of the Chagos Islanders, or seeking justice for the Kenyans oppressed during the Mau-Mau independence rebellion.*

None of this fits with a narrative which pays lip service to human rights but denigrates those who fight for them and who have to stand up to an increasingly authoritarian British government in doing so. Nor does Western power necessarily promote democracy, however shallow. More often than not it arms and defends outright autocracy. The authors are therefore unable to acknowledge the very serious mistakes and injustices carried out by past governments and their allies or to recognise how many of these continue. They are correct that many of those motivated by Corbynism, like Corbyn himself, were politicised during the 1960s and 70s over support for liberation struggles, opposition to the Vietnam War and a rejection of the ‘nuclear balance of terror’ which marked the Cold War. The critiques of US and Western imperialist policy overwhelmingly involved a rejection of the policies of one’s own government and its allies. This is what drove the great anti-Vietnam War movement, the solidarity with movements against apartheid and colonialism in Africa and opposition to the Chilean coup, rather than any allegiance to a foreign power.²

The more recent campaign against the Iraq War built on this history of solidarity and campaigning but also went beyond it. In fact, the Stop the War Coalition was a movement which went beyond the traditional components of solidarity and peace campaigns. It was unique in achieving the coming together of those campaigns, along with the majority of the left in Britain, and the third and essential component – the substantial Muslim community in Britain. It was this achievement that allowed the mobilisation of such huge numbers in 2003, and which helped to change British public opinion against that war and against future interventions.³

* Jeremy Corbyn stood out even among left MPs in his support for these causes and many more, his close organisational ties to campaigning groups and movements from Liberation to the Stop the War Coalition, and his extensive knowledge of international politics. See for example: Andrew Murray, *The Fall and Rise of the British Left* (London: Verso Books, 2019) p151–6.

There is no need to look for a simplistic 'campism' in explaining how 2 million people in Britain – and an estimated 30 million worldwide – were motivated to protest at this war led by the US, Britain, Italy and Spain. As even Pitts and Thompson acknowledge above, the great movement over Iraq was motivated overwhelmingly by opposition to a neoconservative agenda aiming to impose regime change in Iraq, and which was prepared both to ignore avenues to peace and to fabricate and exaggerate evidence to justify military intervention.

The refusal to acknowledge this is part of the intellectual problem with the 'campist' argument. This is its inability to recognise that there can be an indigenous and home-grown opposition to a state's foreign policy objectives and its wars, without any orientation to a foreign power. Yet every anti-war and peace movement in Britain has been motivated by criticisms of its own government and the desire to change its policies from within, rather than from endorsing another regime. William Morris was not promoting Mahdism when he opposed Britain's war in the Sudan; nor was Keir Hardie an agent of the Kaiser. The pacifism which developed strongly during and after the First World War, the nuclear disarmament movement around CND which rose in the 1950s at the height of the Cold War, and the mass movement against the Vietnam War in the 1960s all had indigenous roots. It is this tradition from which Corbyn and his supporters come.

The anti-war movement of the past two decades stands in this long tradition of building opposition to war within the working class and trade union movements of Britain. Equally there has been a long parallel tradition of denouncing those who campaign against war as disloyal or unpatriotic, a charge which those who call anti-war campaigners 'campists' echo in their desire to support those who wage wars allegedly in the name of democracy and therefore feel we are being insufficiently supportive of our 'own camp'.

From the very beginning, the Stop the War Coalition has been variously accused of support for the Taliban, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Syria's Assad, Libya's Ghaddafi, Vladimir Putin... the list goes on. Many of these have been awarded the epithet of 'the new Hitler', with everything that implies. In the build up to the Iraq War, analogies comparing Saddam to Hitler and opponents of the war to appeasers in the 1930s were widespread.⁴

The answer to this charge is simple: in every case we have campaigned against the actions of our own government – which does not imply support for their enemies, but does demand that, in the words of our former patron Tam Dalyell, that we 'first do no harm'. Opposing war in Iraq did not imply support for Saddam – indeed some of our key speakers were exiled Iraqis with a

tremendous record of opposing him and suffering as a result. The same is true of the other examples.

Convenient as it may be for those who want to support the wars to try to place us in a camp with other governments rather than accepting that a sizeable body of opinion in Britain does not agree with its own government, their arguments do not stand up to scrutiny in other ways. They do not take into account complexity and changes in politics. Take for example Iran – the Islamic Republic established in 1979 has long been seen as in opposition to the US. But it also supported the Afghan War in 2001, tried to broker a peace agreement there to hand over bin Laden, and was a long-term enemy of Saddam Hussein (fighting a bloody war with Iraq in the 1980s, in which the US backed Iraq). This suggests a much more varied approach to US foreign policy than is commonly implied.

Stop the War speakers and writers have spoken at thousands of meetings, contributed to television and radio debates, and written articles, books and letters at great length on these positions, often in the face of widespread media hostility and attempts at marginalisation. Yet Pitts and Thompson can argue:

The ‘two-campist’ positioning of Corbyn’s intellectual and political milieu, which relates world events to a crudely caricatured clash between the West and the rest, is instinctive and reflexive rather than properly thought-through. It is an under-theorised posture automatically adopted in response to the vagaries and complexities of foreign affairs.⁵

It is a shame that they do not place the pro-war positions within Labour under the same scrutiny. Hilary Benn’s speech in 2015 was full of rhetoric about fighting fascism in Syria and the importance of Labour not standing aside in international disputes.⁶ It was a deceitful argument – the International Brigades which fought in Spain against Franco were organised mainly by the Communists and others on the left, and certainly not by the National Government! Official Labour played no part in them, or in aid for the Spanish republic, and pressurised the left who wanted to work with the CPGB to desist, with threats of discipline. On the issue of Spain and more generally of the rise of fascism in the 1930s, the position of Labour, and especially its right wing, was to see it not as a great cause but as ‘a problem to be overcome.’⁷ And Labour’s record of ‘standing aside’ in international disputes is rather more considerable than Benn allowed, including over Vietnam, South Africa and Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) – in the case of the latter, Harold Wilson effectively did nothing when the white racists illegally declared independence.

Heralded as a great parliamentary speech, Benn’s address has barely been followed up by anything that could be remotely called assessment of the

situation. But the motive there was clear – to defeat Jeremy Corbyn’s wish to oppose intervention and to reverse Labour’s position from 2013 when the party under Ed Miliband voted against David Cameron’s previous attempt to initiate bombing of Syria (an attempt which, had it been successful, might well have cleared the way for Islamic State to take power in Damascus).

Under Keir Starmer, Labour looks likely to retreat much further towards the Atlanticist position which has marked a great deal of the party’s bipartisan approach to foreign policy. It is a position which led its keenest adherents within the Parliamentary Labour Party towards repeated hostile attacks on Corbyn, including Ian Austin (then a Labour MP, now a Tory-nominated peer after backing Boris Johnson at the last election) heckling of the party leader for apologising for the Iraq War. Starmer’s Shadow Foreign Secretary, Lisa Nandy, seems fully signed up to this approach and therefore receives the warm approbation of Pitts and Thompson.

Yet it is surely the relentless support for US foreign policy come what may, and regardless of the human rights consequences, that is instinctive and unreflexive, let alone under-theorised. It reduces the complexity of international relations to a necessary deference to US hegemony, and to justification of high levels of military and arms expenditure in order to maintain that hegemony.

The present Labour leadership, the Tories and the ruling class generally in Britain are heaving a collective sigh of relief that Corbyn has been ousted and that Labour’s policy on these issues is now in the safe hands of the likes of Nandy and Benn.⁸ This may give them short term comfort, but their remarkable inability to understand how and why so many people in Britain oppose the actions of their government on these questions is their weakness. They continue instead to try to scapegoat those who hold these views as being in another camp, but they are not succeeding in changing anti-war opinion.

2. HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

It is a remarkable achievement to address the past two decades of British foreign policy without drawing a balance sheet of the successes and failures of the successive wars of ‘humanitarian intervention’. Yet this is exactly what the authors of *A Progressive Foreign Policy for New Times* do. Despite the reservations expressed in the introduction by Mary Kaldor and Alex Sobel, who point out the deadly consequences of airstrikes in the Kosovo War of 1999, the first ‘humanitarian intervention’ by British and US governments of recent times, there is little honest accounting of their consequences.

Such interventions have become a hallmark of the post-Cold War world. The break-up of the old Soviet Union and the eastern bloc left the victor in that war, the US, no longer facing a second superpower. The first major conflict of this new period was the 1990–91 Gulf War against Iraq over its seizure of Kuwait. Despite the war’s brutal nature – including the barbaric spectacle of the bombing of retreating Iraqi soldiers on the Basra Road – it was justified along lines which would soon become familiar: the then US president George Bush Snr was waging war against a brutal dictatorship which was abusing its own citizens. One of the most powerful narratives justifying that war was the alleged case of babies being torn from incubators in Kuwait by invading Iraqi troops, a fable which proved to be the invention of a Washington PR firm hired by Kuwait’s rulers.⁹

Similar arguments were made to justify military intervention in the former Yugoslavia, whose constituent parts broke up from the early 1980s onwards, accompanied by ethnic cleansing and war. At first this intervention by major Western powers was arm’s length (as with German support for Croatian independence in 1991) but by the mid-1990s the US was bombing Serbian positions in Bosnia. Then in 1999 fully fledged conflict between the US and its allies and Serbia broke out with an extensive bombing war, supposedly to defend the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo. More than 20 years later, the issues remain unresolved, despite Western support for Kosovo’s unilateral redrawing of state boundaries, a principle the same powers condemn elsewhere.

The Chicago speech by Tony Blair in 1999 – generally reckoned as laying down some of the key principles of humanitarian intervention – took place against the background of the war against Yugoslavia. In it Blair conjured the image a civilised liberal world reluctantly using military force in order to avenge attacks

sanctioned by governments on the human rights of those living within their jurisdiction. He also set out principles to justify such interventions – principles he largely disregarded himself in relation to the Iraq War three years later.

The United Nations agreed the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect in 2005, using the idea that governments have responsibility to protect their own populations, and extending this to interventions by the UN in other countries in order to protect their populations from their own governments.

The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the Charter, to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In this context, we are prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council, in accordance with the Charter, including Chapter VII, on a case-by-case basis and in cooperation with relevant regional organizations as appropriate, should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

The doctrine, plus the increasing tendency to direct intervention marked by the onset of the War on Terror in 2001, signified support for the widespread assumption that such humanitarian interventions work. Any close scrutiny of the past two decades shows a very different outcome. The contrast between high flowing moral imperatives from a range of political figures – Hilary Benn, David Cameron and Barack Obama among them – and the actuality could not be greater.

In reality the wars of recent decades were not noble crusades against ‘fascism’ but attempts at regime change involving the deployment of huge amounts of military might. This often succeeded quite easily in overthrowing existing governments. However, the methods of imperialist war and occupation proved totally incapable of building the better societies they had promised – instead they led to endless continuing conflict, widespread displacement, human rights abuses and often very large numbers of civilian casualties as well as refugees. Many societies will not recover from the consequences of being ‘saved’ by the West for generations.

Take Afghanistan: the war launched by the second George Bush in 2001 followed the events of 9/11 and was on the basis that the perpetrators of those attacks prepared them from Afghan territory, allowed to do so by the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban government. The war which followed was initially

short, unsurprisingly given the poverty of the country, the overwhelming might of the US and the near universal support for the action internationally, and the fact that there was already an ongoing civil war; so the West was able to rely on allies on the ground in the shape of the Northern Alliance.

The BBC's Jon Simpson rolled into Kabul on a tank, and the Taliban and its supporters fled. Yet 20 years on, the Taliban controls large sections of the country and is involved in peace negotiations, Islamic State has grown as a force in Afghanistan, the US maintains a military presence there despite repeated promises that it will withdraw, and most importantly the population lives in one of the most dangerous and poorest countries in the world, where many can only secure a living by cultivating heroin for sale in the West.

According to the World Bank:

2019 was the sixth year in a row when civilian casualties in Afghanistan exceeded 10,000. The displacement crisis persists, driven by intensified government and Taliban operations in the context of political negotiations. The number of conflict induced IDPs increased from 369,700 in 2018 to 462,803 in 2019. An additional 505,000 refugees returned to Afghanistan, mainly from Iran, during 2019.¹⁰

A Gallup survey reinforces this view, showing that only 13% of its citizens felt safe when asked – the lowest in the world.¹¹ No doubt one reason for this and for the high civilian death toll is the continued and intensified bombing of the country under Donald Trump, despite his desire to withdraw American troops from the country.

Even the pamphlet's authors concede that the invasion and occupation of Iraq was a mistake. Support for that particular war seems confined nowadays only to the closest Blair and Bush acolytes and to residual neocon true believers in politics and the media. But this acceptance of reality also involves a refusal to scrutinise – let alone try to change – the continuing dislocation and destruction caused by the occupation and regime change.

It is impossible to list in a few paragraphs the balance sheet of the war and occupation. Over a million Iraqis are estimated to have died, millions have been displaced internally and externally as refugees, Islamic State was incubated in US and UK occupied Iraq and controlled parts of the country, civil society is destroyed, and Iraqis live in constant privation and danger. According to Amnesty International, 1.55 million people remain internally displaced, and there are widespread human rights abuses.¹²

The Chilcot report of 2016 found that Blair had lied about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, yet he and his loyal press officer, Alastair Campbell, are more likely to be seen in obsequious interviews and chat shows than they are having to account or take responsibility for their actions.

Recent actions in both the US and UK with regard to crimes committed during the occupation show the contemptuous attitude of those who have created this situation. One of Donald Trump's last acts as president was to pardon four Blackwater security guards who killed Iraqi civilians in a 2007 Baghdad massacre,¹³ while the British government has introduced legislation – the Overseas Operations Act – to limit prosecution for alleged war crimes.¹⁴ In addition, the International Criminal Court has said it will not continue to scrutinise cases of alleged British war crimes in Iraq despite concerns and preliminary findings that they had taken place.¹⁵

Today, Iraq is bitterly divided and impoverished, its elections barely produce functioning government and it has increasingly become a theatre for the USA and Iran to wage proxy war against each other.

One might have expected that by 2011 the experience of the previous interventions would have ensured that there would be no repetition. Sure enough, the major powers made sure that their future wars would not involve the full-on invasions and occupations which had produced such disastrous outcomes. However, when the 'Arab Spring' broke out the Western powers had every intention of intervening to influence the outcome in favour of the US and its European allies. This took the most dramatic form in Libya, where Western bombing (led by the former colonial powers in North Africa: Britain, France and Italy, and backed by Obama's US) was portrayed as a 'humanitarian intervention' to prevent a massacre in Benghazi, but itself resulted in 30,000 civilian deaths, the overthrow and brutal killing of the former president Ghaddafi, and the resulting civil war helping to create one of the most unstable countries in the world – a situation which still continues a decade later. Libya now has several competing governments, is riven by civil war and continuing interference by various external powers and has generated a huge refugee crisis.

The outcomes in every case have been the opposite of those promised. Threats to liberty and human life are still everyday features of these societies. Unpleasant dictators or repressive government have been overthrown to be replaced with other autocrats who have found favour with Western governments, or their countries have disintegrated. Countries such as Libya and Iraq have seen many of their natural resources, especially oil, transferred into the hands of Western private companies. The cruel promise that these wars

would help to usher in more prosperous and peaceful societies in the countries concerned has been shown to be false again and again.

Perhaps most remarkable in their assessments of recent interventions are Pitts and Thompson's assertions over the war in Syria. Here they argue that the terrible conflict in the country has been worsened by non-intervention by the West:

The Stop-the-War worldview cannot accommodate situations where Western inaction, rather than Western intervention, has played a decisive role in unfolding violence. When the StWC discusses the Syrian conflict, it is almost wholly silent about the role of Russia or Iran, and even the Assad regime itself.¹⁶

Things may be bad when the US bombs and invades a country, they argue, but *not* bombing and invading can have equally dire consequences. Except that Syria has unfortunately suffered from intervention on all sides since the uprising in 2011, part of the Arab Spring, which challenged Assad through protests and demonstrations but quickly turned to military conflict. The situation led to fragmentation of the country, large numbers of civilian casualties and waves of refugees, and the growth of ISIS in parts of the country. Russia began bombing in 2015 in support of Assad – something condemned from day one very publicly by the Stop the War Coalition, which has been far from 'almost wholly silent' on the question. But intervention has come variously from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Turkey, France, the UK, the US, Iran, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Its form has ranged from invasion and bombing, using covert forces and funding and arming groups to fight. The pretence that intervention has all been on the side of Assad is not only false but a complete distortion of what has taken place.

3. ANTI-IMPERIALISM MATTERS

Opposition to anti-imperialism is central to the critique of Corbyn's foreign policy and the outlook of Stop the War. The Open Labour pamphlet is explicit: 'the "two-campist" anti-imperialism of the recent Labour leadership has little to offer any progressive foreign policy.'¹⁷ To further underline the point, Starmer's Shadow Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, Wayne David MP, welcomed the pamphlet and urged the Party to drop its 'obsession with anti-imperialism.'

This is a curious position on the face of it. No Labour politician would demand that the Party soft-pedal its anti-racism, nor accuse it of being 'obsessed' with anti-fascism or opposition to slavery. And just let any Labour Party member suggest that the Party is obsessed with antisemitism – they would likely be suspended in an instant. Yet apparently one can go too far in opposing imperialism.

Let us say first of all, this is a very *British* position. In most of the world, the world held captive to one empire or another for generations, anti-imperialism is a core political value. But blindness to imperialism and its consequences, including the view that the Empire was on balance a good thing, is baked into the British political system.

Historically, it has been baked into the Labour Party too. Labour's leadership down the generations generally supported first the Empire, then the neo-imperialist alliance with the USA, with only the minimum of ethical equivocation. In this respect, Tony Blair was an extreme example, but not entirely an outlier.

It was Blair and Bush, however, who restored imperialism and, hence, anti-imperialism to the mainstream of political discourse. For many years prior to the attack on Iraq, the concept had tended to seem an archaic piece of leftist jargon. The invasion and occupation of Iraq by an Anglo-American force gave the idea common currency once more. Pitts and Thompson are right that opposition to the Iraq War, which could be said to have given birth to contemporary anti-imperialism, was 'a primary engine of the ascendancy of Corbynism.'¹⁸ Indeed, it stands alongside Corbyn's forthright opposition to austerity at the core of his political project. Austerity and war represented the two things Labour Party members were determined to move on from in 2015.

It is fairly clear why the likes of Wayne David are against anti-imperialism. David supported the invasion of Iraq, the intervention in Afghanistan and the calamitous bombing of Libya in 2011. He has been with 21st century neo-imperialism all the way. It is deplorable that such a position is still somehow respectable within the Labour Party.

Imperialism is defined in different ways, although few today would still tie it exclusively to the formal control of territory in the classical colonial fashion. Stop the War has always argued that war connects to domestic policy in many ways as a matter of course. This is not about 'blowback' but about the inseparability of how a state acts abroad with how it operates 'at home'. At our foundation in 2001 we identified a racist backlash and curbs on civil liberties as likely consequences of the War on Terror. Unfortunately, we were proved right in so doing.

It is easy to see that particular acts of international intervention have domestic consequences. Migration and in particular the refugee crisis have become major issues in politics across Europe. Undeniably this has been turbocharged by the wars in Libya and Syria, in both of which, as we have seen, British military interference played a major part. These aggressions compounded existing inequalities reflected in global poverty and resource depletion. One can call that an aspect of imperialism or not, but one is talking about the same thing.

Likewise, Islamophobia is today in Britain virtually the only form of prejudice and bigotry which it is entirely respectable to publicly avow. The Prime Minister has led the way. This is partly rooted in the imperial experience, the 'othering' of colonised peoples and the tactics of divide-and-rule, but it has also been powerfully reinforced by the War on Terror, which has been exclusively conducted against Muslim-majority states.

This country's role as an imperial power goes some way to explaining why racism is so central to British society. The level of racism in Britain today – and especially at governmental and institutional level – is rooted in the history of imperialism and its consequences. The legacy of empire is reflected in issues such as the Windrush or Grenfell scandals, and the current wars help to reinforce that racism.

Imperialism is a matter of domestic economy and industry too. Many on the left deplore the overweening influence of the City of London – the finance sector – in the country's economy. London's central role in the circulation and redistribution of capital on behalf of the world system as a whole is again rooted in both past and present – in the days when Britain had an informal empire almost as significant as its colonial possessions; and in the

contemporary fact that the City's interest in unimpeded financial flows globally gives it a major stake in supporting the 'world order' and its sheriff, the USA. Rebalancing the economy in Britain – diminishing the power of the 'financial services' sector – means changing our relations with the rest of the world.

Two industries intimately bound up with imperialism are arms production and oil. The big companies in these sectors, like British Aerospace (BAE Systems) and BP, have long wielded a disproportionate influence on domestic politics. They have major connections to the Gulf regimes, for example, and work to mute any concerns about the policies of those despotisms. Their businesses are enormously profitable, depend on an expansive British foreign policy, but are scarcely of great benefit to humanity.

So, anti-imperialism is not a marginal preoccupation, nor an 'obsession' which distorts the left's political perspective. Not only should it be at the heart of what the Open Labour pamphlet claims to want – a progressive foreign policy – it also impacts on the entirety of the programme of a radical government. This is something the Corbyn leadership well understood.

Of course, it is perfectly true to argue, as Pitts and Thompson do, that to simply classify things as imperialist, or to say that we are against imperialism, cannot be the end of any analysis of world politics. For one thing, imperialism does not bear exactly the same character now as it did one hundred or two hundred years ago; and for another there are in any case pressing problems requiring a concerted global response which cannot wait until the world order imperialism has shaped is replaced.

Concretely, Pitts and Thompson are right to say that the world of 2021 is different to that of 2001. Then we were still in the midst of the 'unipolar moment' – the post-cold war phase when the US was the unchallenged global hegemon aspiring to dominate global politics indefinitely. At the turn of the century, Washington regarded Russia as finished business, and believed that a largely quiescent China would be gradually integrated into the world system in a position subordinate to the USA.

That moment has evidently passed – in part, at least, due to the catastrophic mistakes made by the US hegemon, both in Iraq and in imposing a failed model of neoliberal capitalism on much of the world, the system which exploded in 2008. Russia has become a great power rival, at least in its own backyard and in the Middle East, while China is on course to become the world's largest economy, with growing diplomatic and military heft to match. Other powers – most notably Turkey – are also pursuing their own agendas, increasingly autonomous from Washington.

A whole number of states have over the past two decades developed their military and economic might and are important regional players – including India, Saudi Arabia, Brazil and China. The top five military spenders in 2019 were the US, China, India, Russia and Saudi Arabia. US spending alone accounts for 38% of world military spending, rising sharply as it has worldwide to 2.2% of world GDP.¹⁹ China is now second only to the US and also its major rival economically. We have also seen much greater investment in countries such as the UK and other European states by China, some of the Gulf States and India. The military might of countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also seen them play much bigger roles in conflict and diplomacy across the Middle East.

However, these changes do not make the concept of anti-imperialism less relevant. Quite the reverse. Imperialism, conceived as a system, can generate different world orders. The classical, pre-1914 model, was of great power rivalry. Even then, however, a phase of collaboration of the great powers in a common enterprise was conceivable. Later, one great power, the USA, established an effective hegemony over all its putative rivals. Elements of these later models can be seen in world politics today. International organisations like the IMF, the WTO, the World Bank and NATO tend in their fields to express the common interests of the big powers, while the USA continues to deploy vastly more military capability than any other country or combination of states.

Pitts and Thompson appear to suggest that the rise of new powers like China and Russia, in effect a transition to a period when great power rivalry becomes more important in world politics, makes anti-imperialism redundant. Even if they are right about the new phase – and they considerably exaggerate the relative power of China and Russia as against that of the USA – it would make a clear-sighted view of imperialism more important, even if more complicated.

Stop the War has never been blind to these changes. However, we start from our political tasks in Britain, which sits at the heart of the US-led world order. We remain more closely aligned with Washington's policy than almost any other power. Our anti-imperialism must therefore start from here. Britain is part of one imperial bloc, and that is the one we need to challenge in our effort to give the country a new direction in world affairs.

This is now urgent. As noted above, there are tasks that require immediate collaboration regardless of other considerations – climate change, arms control and supporting refugees among them. Imperialism makes these issues harder, but it does not preclude the possibility of progress. In StWC our specific mission is stopping war. There is nothing more important. Great power rivalry caused first two world wars and could cause a third.

Anti-imperialism is essential to informing our campaigning. There is of course space in the anti-war movement for other perspectives, and always has been, provided only that the essentials of standing up to British government policy are shared. These are the hard practical issues which any progressive Labour government would need to face, and they cannot be avoided by windy moral posturing.

4. WHAT ABOUT...

The Open Labour pamphlet repeats a charge long made against Stop the War and against Jeremy Corbyn during his Labour Party leadership. It is the allegation of inconsistency – of only criticising the faults of the West and its allies, while being blind to the sins, actual or alleged, of regimes opposed to the US-dominated world order.

Sometimes, as a variation on this line of attack, the Left is accused of ‘whataboutery’, of diverting debate about Russian annexation of the Crimea, for example, by raising the unpunished Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus, or the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Of course, it is easy to flip these arguments on their head. Why does the establishment, and that section of the left which echoes its foreign policy, urge sanctions against Putin for his actions in the Crimea which, while undoubtedly illegal did at least appear to correspond to the preferences of the inhabitants of the peninsula, while stoutly opposing sanctions against Israel for its occupation of the West Bank, which certainly does not?

There is more to this argument than merely scoring debating points, valid though that can sometimes be. The choices made reflect the underlying politics of the main actors. Ethics, alas, play only a small part here. Let us look at some obvious discrepancies.

NATO went to war against Yugoslavia in 1999, officially to forestall a brewing refugee crisis in Kosovo. Yet an undoubted and far larger refugee crisis in Myanmar, involving its Muslim Rohingya population passed without intervention, or even much rhetorical condemnation of the Myanmar regime.

Pitts and Thompson pay a lot of attention to Syria, where there has been an undoubted humanitarian calamity, prolonged and intensified rather than mitigated by external intervention, including Western. A calamity on a similar scale is continuing in Yemen, yet this receives far less attention – and the only intervention by Britain is on the side of those bearing the main responsibility. The Saudi and UAE governments are intervening with British arms, British diplomatic support and British military advice.²⁰

Indeed, the Open Labour pamphlet follows conventional wisdom in pointing to the activities of Iran as a rising menace to the stability of the Middle East. But which state has, over the last few years attacked another (Yemen), invaded

a second to suppress a democracy movement (Bahrain), blockaded a third (Qatar), kidnapped the Prime Minister of a fourth (Lebanon), funded a jihadist insurgency in a fifth (Syria), lavishly underwritten a military coup against an elected government in a sixth (Egypt) and dismembered a journalist in its consulate in a seventh (Turkey), all the while escaping Western censure? Here it may be worth recalling that the biggest Labour backbench breaking of the whip under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership was over the issue of maintaining arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

Likewise, Britain bombed in support of a rising against authoritarianism in Libya but sent police advisers (admittedly not very impressive ones) to Bahrain as the regime there clamped down on a democracy movement. Further – this was the moment chosen to open a new naval base in that Gulf state, taking Britain's armed forces back 'east of Suez'. Here Britain was not so much mute as actively complicit in opposing human rights.

One can call this hypocrisy. But it is also a strategy – one that subordinates other considerations (democracy, human rights, national sovereignty, international law, etc) to the exigencies of maintaining the existing power set-up in the world, in which the internal nature of regimes and, in cases like the Saudi regime, even their external behaviour is less consequential than their geopolitical alignment.

Stop the War too has a consistency in its positions. It is that the nature of a country's regime is a matter for that country's people. That does not exclude solidarity and support for those struggling for freedom, of course. But it does preclude the external imposition of a political choice, by military means or otherwise. Systems thus imposed seldom prove sturdy plants. And the effort to introduce them has uniformly dreadful consequences. International law does provide limited grounds for intervention, including against the preparation of aggression or against genocide, a term now bandied around rather too freely. Opposing wars launched for other reasons and beyond international authority does not imply any endorsement of the regimes targeted.

Pitts and Thompson are less than helpful here. Instead, they trumpet the universal desirability of liberal values, including most certainly liberal-democratic capitalism, over all comers. Slightly curiously they invoke the authority of the late Norman Geras for this position – Geras was one of the leading left supporters of the Iraq aggression in 2003 but one who by 2006 acknowledged that he had erred in his earlier advocacy of war. His trajectory might have inspired the reflection that life is a bit more complex than simply banging the drum for liberalism and relying on the Anglo-American military for muscle. Yet they quote approvingly defeated 2016 Labour leadership challenger

Owen Smith's invocation of Labour's 'internationalist tradition of intervention.' There are few around the world demanding that Labour adhere to that particular tradition in future.

The Open Labour pamphlet is also afflicted by a highly selective blindness as to the actual disposition of power in the world today. For example, its authors fret over China's belt-and-road initiative, a peaceful project which many countries around the world, with diverse governments, are happy to associate with. Yes, there are concerns about resulting indebtedness, but it is worth asking why so many governments prefer to engage with China in their pursuit of development rather than the traditional imperial powers.

Likewise, Pitts and Thompson stoke alarm about China's growing military strength. They claim that China has three military bases outside its own territory. Others say that the number is one (Djibouti). Yet even if the higher figure is the accurate one, it is fewer bases around the world than Britain has in Cyprus alone (or the USA in Bulgaria, for example). If China's trio of bases constitute a looming threat, what is one to make of the Pentagon's estimated 800 military facilities in seventy different states? Bases which encircle Iran and, to the extent possible, China too.

Even Britain has around forty such bases outside the UK itself. The Open Labour assumption that these can only be benign and in support of a well-intentioned policy cannot survive scrutiny of the actual records of British governments this century, never mind in a longer historical perspective. It is in practice an argument for the maintenance of the international status quo, which is to say the continuation of US hegemony in the world.

Russia has more external bases than China, most of them located in former Soviet Republics. But its military footprint in the wider world is again puny compared to that of the USA. So what is the fuss about? Of all people, leading US economist Jeffrey Sachs put his finger on it in a recent letter to the *Financial Times*:

This has nothing to do with the Communist Party of China, despite all the chest-beating by the US. The real issue for US elites is that China dares to think it can have a say in what should rightly be an American-led world, the same shock that Britain's imperialists expressed in the 19th century when China had the temerity to resist the importation of opium on offer by British merchants. All one can say is this. The provocation of a new cold war is an idiocy that should cause us to tremble.²¹

All this underlines that Stop the War is right to focus on the US and its allies as the pre-eminent force threatening peace and independence in the world,

and the one moreover with which Britain is intimately associated, and to be sceptical of the policy of those who apply their declared principles so selectively. A progressive foreign policy depends on breaking with the hypocrisies of imperialism – it cannot be accommodated within them.

5. TWO FOREIGN POLICIES FOR THE LEFT

While the Open Labour pamphlet makes a sustained critique of the foreign policy positions associated with Jeremy Corbyn, it makes no comparable effort to address the record of the last time Labour was in government, in particular the record of Tony Blair, something we have done above.

Yet that is broadly the choice Labour has – the record of New Labour, which was one of unconditional alignment with the USA (including and especially under the right-wing administration of George Bush), or the different approach advocated by Corbyn, and by the mass movements and campaigns which supported him before and during his Labour leadership.

Labour's record in office is overshadowed entirely by the Iraq catastrophe, the fruit of Tony Blair's determination to align with the US government come what may. Pitts and Thompson attempt no defence of the war now – indeed, it is almost impossible to find advocates today. However, they write as if it was an aberration, a situation which Stop the War called correctly more-or-less by chance.

Alas, the last generation abounds with such aberrations. The Libyan intervention, which passed parliament with overwhelming bipartisan support and which occasioned little by way of mass opposition at the time, is now uniformly seen to have been another huge mistake. The Afghan War is, after nearly 20 years, acknowledged to have achieved little or nothing at the price of huge loss of life and destruction. Even the war against Yugoslavia in 1999, like previous interventions in that country, cannot be said to have led to unambiguously positive outcomes.

Much of this the pamphlet acknowledges. Yet still it wants to scratch the old itch, to have Labour go before the voters at the next election with a policy seeking to refurbish interventionism once more, in alliance with the new Biden administration in the USA.

In this, Pitts and Thompson seem to be marching in step with Lisa Nandy, Shadow Foreign Secretary. She too is eager for Labour to 'win the argument for ethical intervention'. She even positioned herself to the right of Starmer, by sniping at his leadership campaign pledge to oppose illegal wars. She condemned this for reopening 'old wounds about Iraq', making it 'harder to

win the argument that in so many other instances intervention, whether it's military, whether it's diplomatic, whether it's aid-related, mattered.²²

Financial Times columnist Jemima Kelly was surely right to warn that when Lisa Nandy tweeted that "Britain must be a 'force for good in the world'" she was bringing "to mind an image of a benevolent Britain which should steer the rest of the world in the right direction, and idea that is just as steeped in 'imperial nostalgia' – perhaps even amnesia – as any Brexit fantasy of gunboats and military glory."²³ Indeed, morality not militarism has always been the flag liberal imperialism has marshalled under.

Of course, the capacity of any Labour government to actually act on such an outlook will depend very much on the administration in power in Washington at the time. Britain's capacity to start a war autonomously is very limited although Libya showed that Britain (in association with France) could drag a semi-unwilling Washington into a conflict behind it.

It also remains to be seen to what extent Biden does indeed revert to Blair-Clinton style interventionism. The signs are mixed. Much of his foreign policy team come from the liberal war-making wing of the Democratic Party. A *New York Times* columnist recently noted Biden's 'traditional view' that 'the United States leads, allies fall into line.' Nandy seems to have got there already. On the other hand, Biden has signalled he wants to revive the nuclear deal with Iran, which would go some way towards defusing the main flashpoint in the Middle East at present.

It is also more likely that Biden will follow Obama and Trump in prioritising confronting China. This represents the danger of a new Cold War, but not of an Iraq-style invasion or a Libya-style bombing campaign, at least for the foreseeable future. Britain has announced that it will dispatch one of its two aircraft carriers to the Far East to assist in this confrontational posture. Nandy appears signed up to the anti-China strategy – Stop the War can see no case for Britain deploying military hardware on the other side of the globe, against a country which poses no military threat to us.

The alternative to a return to the dismal policy of Labour trans-Atlanticism and liberal interventionism is the programme Stop the War and Jeremy Corbyn have fought for over the last 20 years and more. Stop the War was not just right about Iraq, as the Open Labour pamphlet reluctantly concedes, it was right about Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen too, as we have argued here.

The War on Terror has not diminished terrorism; it has not brought peace, stability or a flowering of democracy; it has not made the world safer or more

equal. It has caused massive loss of life and material destruction, it has stoked racism, imperilled civil liberties and squandered endless blood and treasure, including of British soldiers. It has been a calamity. But still greater calamities loom if it now morphs into great power conflict, of which a new Cold War would be the anteroom.

Much of this is now common sense. But it is also worth recalling that the Iraq aggression did not want for defenders on the liberal/left end of politics at the time. Indeed, the media was over-run with them. And the war was, of course, backed by the majority of Labour MPs. This is an argument that needs re-winning.

But it is prevailing, for now, amongst Labour Party members, even if their leaders lag behind. A YouGov survey of Party members opinions, conducted at the start of 2020 found that the campaigning organisation which they liked best was Stop the War with a 41% net positive rating, with Palestine Solidarity Campaign in second place, a net 35% to the good.²⁴ Bringing up the rear among the campaigns mentioned was Labour Friends of Israel. Anti-imperialism is embedded in the Labour Party that Corbyn shaped.

This support for Stop the War remains high despite incessant attacks by the media and politicians, which reached their most recent peak during the Commons vote over airstrikes in Syria at the end of 2015. Not only was StWC's position misrepresented, but its campaigning methods were also traduced, a smear Pitts and Thompson reproduce with a reference to 'sometimes ugly' tactics. This appears to link to completely discredited allegations regarding actions in the Walthamstow constituency of Stella Creasey at the time. Another Labour MP complained that someone had posted pictures of dead children through his letterbox. Crude tactics no doubt but Stop the War does not believe that MPs should take decisions of life and death in solitary contemplation with nothing but their consciences (and perhaps a copy of *Jane's Military Aircraft*) for company. These are matters of the highest seriousness, and the people themselves have a right to make their voices heard, and their anger plain, before they are taken.

Corbynism offers a different approach to the world. His Labour government would have aimed at disengaging Britain from the US-led hegemonic project, focussing instead on dispute resolution, de-escalation of conflicts and the reallocation of resources to poverty alleviation. It would have been a friend, rather than the sworn enemy, of movements for liberation and social justice, and radical governments, around the world. Every effort would have been made to address injustices like the dispossession of the Chagos Islanders and the occupation of the Palestinian territories. And over the longer term it would

have reduced the power of the City of London and curbed the arms trade, two drivers of neo-imperial policy. It would have taken arms conversion seriously. It would not have assumed that Britain has a right and responsibility to intervene militarily willy-nilly.

It would not necessarily have been everything the anti-war movement and the left more generally might have wanted. There was a pragmatic recognition that neither withdrawal from NATO nor unilateral nuclear disarmament were on the agenda, not least because these were not Labour Party policy and a parliamentary majority for either was scarcely conceivable. But the extent of the shift in the British state's international posture would have been considerable and beneficial to Britain and the world alike.

Pitts and Thompson have little to set against this perspective. They offer generalisations about 'solidarity and safeguarding' and 'new partnerships and alliances to stand up for our values'. There is a paucity of specific proposals, beyond a wish to stand up to China over Hong Kong, although again what this would mean in practice is left obscure (assuming that the planned deployment of the aircraft carrier doesn't do the trick). What is clear, however, is that the authors itch to revive interventionism from the obloquy of Iraq (and Libya, Afghanistan etc).

So, what should be done about Yemen? And what about Britain's corrosive and corrupting relationships with the Saudi regime and the other Gulf oligarchies? Should a Labour government seek to extend NATO membership to the Ukraine? Should it back an economic boycott of China? Should it hold Israel to account for its breaches of international law, including via sanctions, or continue to turn a blind eye?

All is silence. If the test of ethics is in their application, the Open Labour approach offers Labour and the electorate little. But we have experience and the attitudes already taken by Lisa Nandy and her team to draw on. It will be an attempt to return to business as usual. Neither Stop the War nor anti-imperialist campaigning will be redundant just yet.

FOOTNOTES

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