

by Michael Meadowcroft

How did it happen that the Liberal Democrats took the brave decision to oppose the invasion of Iraq before it took place, in the absence of concrete evidence, but thereafter virtually abandoned the issue when the evidence was palpably obvious?

Iraq is the greatest political moral issue of our generation, and Bush and Blair are getting away with murder - literally. There has been nothing like it since Suez in 1956 - and that was a small, short-lived scandal by comparison. Every day of every week Iraqis are being killed by militants who refuse to accept an occupation policed and enforced by American troops, supported by the British military and a smattering of forces from other "allied" countries. Since the war began 1879 American troops have been killed - all but 137 since Bush declared "Mission accomplished" on 19th March 2003. By comparison a minimum of 23654 Iraqi civilians have been killed in the same period. And it continues without any let up. In addition to the deteriorating situation within Iraq there are still thousands of individuals held at Guantanamo Bay and in other prisons around the world without trial, or, in most cases, even without charge.

The British government has long since abandoned the arguments for invading Iraq on which it based its case in the crucial House of Commons debate on 26th February 2003. In the absence of any evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Blair, Straw and Reid now continually resort to regime change as a justification for the invasion, even though it was accepted at the time that this did not provide a legal basis for military action. Since then there has been a stream of incriminating leaks of Cabinet papers, and of legal and intelligence advice. And yet, apart from George Galloway and a few brave individual MPs - including the late lamented Robin Cook - the House of Commons is supine. It now appears that Kenneth Clarke's bid for the Conservative leadership will make use of his principled objection to the war.

Every anticipated staging post on the path towards a "new" Iraq has failed to produce stability. First it was the nonsense spouted by the "Allies" on how the troops would be received with open arms, then, when that didn't happen, the view was that once there was an Iraqi administration in place, peace would reign. When the lawlessness and the killings continued it was the holding of elections that would stop it. That didn't work, so the next vain hope was that an Iraqi government would have the legitimacy to bring peace. Now the latest chimera is the adoption of a Constitution - whenever.

I cannot believe that Tony Blair is the only person who, in J K Galbraith's phrase, refuses to confront the obvious - that the invasion of Iraq was a grave error, that the situation in the country is appalling and that to blunder blindly on with the same policies will never resolve the problems. Indeed, I knew immediately I saw the Lord Chancellor, Lord Falconer's appeal on 6 August last that "It is vital the country remained united behind the Prime Minister," that the government had lost all confidence in the arguments for the continued occupation of Iraq. The point was then conveniently driven home by Blair's invitation to opposition leaders to join him in promoting even more futile, illiberal and oppressive legislation - a trap which Howard and Kennedy promptly leaped into.

The situation in Iraq today is worse than ever. The car bombs, the suicide bombers and the terrorism are increasing not decreasing, and there is no initiative whatever being put forward by Bush or Blair. They have no idea of a solution and, amazingly, there is no parliamentary - and little popular - harassment of a Prime Minister and of a Government that has made the most colossal and lethal blunder of the past fifty years. In the midst of daily killings and an "Allied" occupation of Iraq that has been shown to be both illegal and ill founded, Parliament has gone on its long recess as if nothing had happened.

Why is this? Why in particular is the Liberal Democrat parliamentary party so docile and quiescent on the key political issue of our time when it was the sole major party to oppose the war in advance and on which it thus occupies the moral high ground and on which it could capture the mood of the country. The problems of the party's leadership have been well rehearsed - Tory MP David Curry wrote in The Yorkshire Post on 31st August that Charles Kennedy's failure to "force his way into the void" might make him the one person to have saved the Tories - but with 62 MPs the Liberal Democrats

have enough representation to bring parliament to a standstill if they were dedicated and brazen enough.

The Iraq situation is so awful, and its justification so entirely lacking, that it cries out for such action. The Liberal Democrats were right in February 2003 and it should be shouting from the rooftops that only an end to the occupation has a hope of inhibiting the chaos and the killings in Iraq. Every piece of evidence needed to expose the government is available. The leaked evidence from Cabinet papers, the lies over WMDs and the abandonment of any argument based on them, the illegality of the invasion, the illegitimacy of the regime change argument, the indefinite internment without trial of thousands of detainees, the abuse of prisoners, and, above all, the facts on the ground, hand the Lib Dems, and particular to the party's MPs, the responsibility to force parliament to take action and the opportunity to lead public opinion. If they funk such a clear and legitimate challenge it is hard to see what its aim and purpose is as a party. What is the point of a political party fearful of the consequences of its earlier moral courage?

Those of us who set out in advance the case against going to war knew full well that military action would be disastrous and would be a recruiting agent for terrorism. In the crucial parliamentary debate Ken Clarke spelt it out clearly: "The next time a bomb explodes in a western city, or an Arab or Muslim regime topples and is replaced by extremists, the Government must consider the extent to which the policy contributed to it."

A call for an early phased withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq is necessary for Iraqis and is legitimate in its own terms. It would owe nothing to the appalling London bombings even if it could add to Britain's future security. The immediate result of withdrawal is likely to be increased terrorism in Iraq but it provides the only basis for longer term security. There is no solution to the allied-caused problem whilst the occupation continues. When, as in Irbil, car bombs can kill scores of people in Iraqi Kurdistan, where autonomy and shrewd intelligence hitherto prevented terrorism, nowhere and no-one is safe.

The poor Iraqi people. Exploited and terrorised by a vicious regime and now plunged into capricious insecurity, apparently with no hope of it ending. They deserve better. Will the Liberal Democrats speak for them?

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