

Lest We forget, Ten Years Ago: Anti-Iraq War Protesters were in the Right

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by Matthew Carr

TOMORROW it will be exactly ten years since the massive Iraq war protests of 15 February 2003. More than one million people marched in London that day as part of an international series of protests that embraced between six to ten million people and incorporated more than 60 countries and 800 cities.

The demonstrations even reached Antarctica, where dozens of scientists on the American McMurdo Station held an anti-war rally on the ice. It was the largest anti-war mobilisation in history.



What was striking about these protests was not just their scale and their international dimensions, but the range of backgrounds, ideologies, religions and political persuasions of those who took part in them.

In Spain, where opinion polls revealed an astonishing 90 per cent opposition to Prime Minister José Maria Aznar's support for military intervention, models held anti-war placards on the catwalk and La Liga footballers wore T-shirts protesting the war.

The London demonstrators included leftists and conservatives, Quakers, Muslims, and Catholics, children and elderly people, many of whom had never been to a demonstration before.

Supporters of military intervention in Iraq, both then and since, have variously smeared the protesters for being pro-Saddam, anti-American, fellow-travellers of totalitarianism and jihadism, political ingénues and Chamberlain-style 'appeasers'.

Alastair Campbell, the ruthless and cynical apparatchik who did so much to promote the war, wrote contemptuously in his diary of encountering "no end of people coming back from the march, placards under their arms, faces full of self-righteousness, occasional loathing when they spotted me".

Shortly before the march, his boss Tony Blair made the characteristically grandiose and narcissistic observation that unpopularity was "the price of leadership and the cost of conviction" and insisted that there would be "bloody consequences" if Saddam was not "confronted".

On the other side of the Atlantic, Condoleezza Rice declared that the protests would not affect the Bush administration's "determination to confront Saddam Hussein and help the Iraqi people".

Other commentators used the demonstrations to pursue their bitter vendettas with "the Left". The day after the march, Observer columnist Nick Cohen launched a vitriolic attack on the "shameless Stop the War coalition" and "the Pinters, Trotskyists, bishops, actresses and chorus girls" who marched through London, thereby hindering the advent of democracy in Iraq.

As one of those who went to London that day, I remember very well the seriousness and sense of purpose of the demonstrators, many of whom had nothing to do with STWUK and had come from local anti-war groups that they had organised themselves.

Nowhere, either that day or at any time in the build-up to the war, did I find the slightest evidence of support for Saddam or 'anti-Americanism'. But there was a common revulsion at a war of aggression based on lies, massaged intelligence, and the opportunistic manipulation of the 'war on terror'.

These demonstrators may not have been experts on Iraq, but all of them had instinctively reached the same conclusion as Amr Moussa, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, that a war in Iraq would "open the gates of hell".

Tragically, the British political class, with a handful of honourable exceptions, ignored the demonstrators and voted for the war the following month – either because they genuinely believed in it – or more often, one suspects, because it was convenient to their careers to do so.

The consequences of that decision are well-known. Ten years – and hundreds of thousands of lives – later, the gates of hell in Iraq have yet to be closed. Today Iraq remains a violent and traumatised country that hovers between civil war and the prospect of a new dictatorship under the authoritarian Maliki government.

Had the war not taken place, many Iraqis would be alive, and would probably be in the streets, challenging Saddam, as so many Arabs elsewhere have done when faced with dictators whose grip on power once seemed impregnable.

The architects of the war continue to talk of their pride in making it possible. Some have gone on to become media stars (Campbell), millionaire consultants (Blair) or News Corporation directors (Aznar).

Today, the three political parties are all colluding to prevent the publication of documents requested by the Chilcot Inquiry regarding British participation in the war. And despite the calamitous outcome of that war, the coalition government continues to lurch from one 'intervention' to the next with a child-like insouciance.

None of this is anything to gloat about. But it is worth recalling that those who demonstrated on 15 February 2003 were not the ones who were naïve. ·

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