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Speech to Foreign Press Association
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– Check against delivery –

Thank you for that introduction, and thank you for the invitation to address this distinguished audience.

I am delighted to be here. As a candidate for the Deputy Leader of our party I want to raise some issues regarding Britain's foreign policy – and you have given me that opportunity here today.

Labour gaining power in 1997 gave us the opportunity to make a significant contribution to world politics. As our 1997 Manifesto stated: 'Britain can be a force for good in the world'.

And a force for good is exactly what we were. From the ban on landmines, to the international criminal court, to the interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, Labour built an incredibly strong first term record.

But it is with regret that I believe we must acknowledge the terrible mistakes made over Iraq which now overshadows everything we now say on foreign affairs.

I am particularly here to speak to you today about the situation in Iraq as I see it, what I believe to be the legacy of the UK's misguided intervention and the worsening security situation in Iraq and what I think needs to happen now.

As I have said many times over several months, I voted for the War in Iraq and, as things have unfolded, I believe that I was wrong to do so. I regret voting the way I did.

I voted for the war because I believed the premise presented in support of military action - that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, that we could, after securing the removal of Saddam, ensure the development of a liberal democracy, and that this would help the fight against terrorism. In each respect they have proved to be untrue.

As well as being a catastrophic failure for the people of Iraq who are living, everyday with and suffering the terrible consequences of our actions, I

believe that the conflict has and is having serious and ongoing ramifications in the UK and in terms of foreign policy leadership in the rest of the world.

Public opinion is set against our continued military presence in Iraq and people are rightly concerned that the occupation is exacerbating rather than alleviating the terrible violence there. There is a growing consensus that the open-ended presence of our forces is forestalling a negotiated and peaceful settlement in Iraq.

This is a view that has been expressed by senior military personnel. General Dannatt couldn't have been clearer when he spoke out last year.

He said, "The original intention was that we put in place a liberal democracy that was an exemplar for the region, was pro-West and might have a beneficial effect on the balance within the Middle East. [...] I don't think we are going to do that. I think we should aim for a lower ambition.

He added that we should "get ourselves out sometime soon because our presence exacerbates the security problems".

He is right.

Quite simply, as long as military presence, or occupation, as the majority of Iraqis see it, continues, it will continue to divide Iraqis and prevent them from coming to the sort of negotiated political settlement that is an essential precondition for progress and reconciliation. It seems likely therefore that we have become the problem rather than the solution.

It is important that we approach this in a rational and thought through way. We cannot contemplate any sort of disorderly withdrawal, based on a selfish need for national "closure". We have a responsibility to act in the interests of ordinary Iraqis, as well as in our own national self-interest. But we gain nothing from pretending that the current strategy is working.

To achieve a peaceful settlement, - and having of course listened closely to our own senior military and intelligence advisors - we first have to move to internationalise the situation. We must move as quickly as possible to put the forces in Iraq under Security Council control and ensure this new international presence is established as a transitory arrangement with a clearly planned and phased timeline for withdrawal.

These two things I believe can help create the dynamic for the Iraqis themselves to determine the future of Iraq by creating their own roadmap to peace. We should of course do everything within our diplomatic power to

enable this to happen but the lead must be taken by the international community as a whole, mobilising the influence of countries in the region - such as Jordan, Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia - that have close political and cultural ties to Iraq. The time for imposing blueprints drawn up in Washington or London is over.

The long shadow of Iraq is also cast across the rest of the UK's, the US' and our international institutions and is determining how we do, and don't respond to other international situations.

The people of Darfur are suffering the consequences of our failure in Iraq. International leaders, led by the UK and US have argued for months about economic sanctions while the Sudanese government have permitted a genocide to take place.

Indeed Janjaweed atrocities have often occurred under cover of Sudanese air force operations and we should urgently consider the imposition of a no fly zone. It is worth considering whether part of our Iraq legacy has been a reduced capacity to intervene internationally such as in Darfur.

In 1997 New Labour set out a new foreign policy agenda with an ethical dimension. Robin Cook's vision was that our actions in the world could be a force for good, not merely a global extension of our national interest. And it was a force for good. We originated the landmines ban, established the International Criminal Court and intervened to protect thousands of civilians in Kosovo, persuading the US and our European partners to commit to doing the same.

This has somehow been distorted and, whatever the motives, people here and abroad believe our foreign policy has become a cynical and self-interested exercise in power.

We have to re-examine the criteria by which we act and don't act in the world if we are to restore trust in our foreign policy and ensure that our actions are understood.

If we have a defined set of principles or criteria that can be applied to foreign policy situations then our actions can be seen to be both transparent and legitimate.

These might include stages that have to be addressed before military action is considered, the likelihood of success and international support for action secured through our international solutions. We have to do more too to secure backing in our own institutions - I believe that Parliament has to be

better consulted on important foreign policy decisions. I was one of the MPs that supported the recalling of Parliament and a debate on the government's stance on the crisis in the Lebanon last year.

We need to establish a new and clearly understood mandate for international intervention and without this people will quite rightly point to inconsistencies which they will interpret as hypocrisy and motives of self-interest.

I believe that the change in leadership here and the one due to happen in the US next year gives us an opportunity to re-examine our place in the world.

We will always work cooperatively with the US but cannot solely be the US' ally of choice. We need to adopt a more questioning approach to the 'special relationship' and become more of a critical friend. We have also to understand our place in a globalised and 'multipolar' world.

The balance of global power is already shifting with the economic rise of countries like China, India and Brazil.

US hegemony is giving way to a world in which these new and emerging centres of power will stake their claim to international leadership and influence. The choice for Britain and the rest of Europe is therefore clear. Do we wish to take our place in this new multipolar world as a real source of global influence in our own right, or do we wish to remain a junior partner to America? I believe that the best interests of Britain, Europe, and indeed America, would be better served by a transatlantic partnership of strong and equal partners.

We must play our part in building a stronger Europe and using our economic and political strength and stability to promote the interests and values we hold in common. We should work in close partnership with other democracies in South America, Africa and Asia - as well as America - to ensure that the future is one based on progressive and democratic values.

We must also establish a strong and legitimate world order.

We should resist every attempt to assert a vision of a new Cold War built on political or religious lines. And we should return to a position in which military intervention is seen as the option of last resort, undertaken only after the alternatives have been exhausted and in conditions of broad international support.

In dealing with states that abuse their citizens, break international norms, foster extremism, proliferate weapons of mass destruction or threaten other countries, containment and deterrence should be the basis of our approach. Only when that fails to prevent genocide or war should military force be sanctioned. If Iraq has taught us anything, it is that preventative war can exacerbate the very risks it is designed to prevent. It has weakened our moral authority in the world without providing any security gain.

We need to understand the misplaced motives for our intervention in Iraq to allow ourselves and the British people to move on and to build a foreign policy capable of restoring for Britain a position of respect and moral authority in the world. I believe that, when the troops are home, an inquiry could form the basis for reconciliation, as well as a means by which we can learn from our mistakes.

The implications of this foreign policy approach go wider than simply how we act and react to other countries - there is also an implication for our own actions. Take Trident, and the Government's decision over renewing this system.

As many of you will know, I voted against the Government on this issue. Renewing Trident sent the wrong signal around the world at a crucial time. But just as importantly, Trident is the wrong weapon for the wrong era. In an era of engagement and containment, nuclear weapons - especially when they are not truly independent - do not offer the security we need. Instead, we need to ensure that our conventional forces are able to meet the challenges posed.

We are signatories to Article 6 of the Non Proliferation Treaty which imposes an absolute condition upon us to work in "good faith" for total disarmament. The multilateral NPT talks are due in 2010. How can we go to those talks and recommend to the rest of the world that they disarm whilst we have unilaterally determined a course of action which looks to the rest of the world like the start of a rearmament process, especially when we are also so closely linked to the US decision to implement the so-called National Missile Defence System against which President Putin so vehemently objected a few days ago?

We also have to move against the other foreign policy events that have eroded our moral authority - our tacit support for detention without trial at Guantanamo, rendition flights - both outside of international law.

There is a responsibility too to help strengthen our international institutions - the UN, the WTO, the IMF are all remote, largely undemocratic and

unaccountable institutions. And as we should seek to try and a force for good in the world when we look at potential trouble spots, we should also seek to express our economic values of social justice at the international stage as well.

We have rightly laid to rest the old Tory argument that social justice is opposite to our economic interests. We should also lay to rest the idea that acting in Britain's interests internationally means slavishly pressing for neoliberal economic policies in WTO talks. The impression has been allowed to grow - because of our role in placing conditions for aid and trade deals, and because our efforts to prematurely open the markets of the world's poorest countries to unfair trade - that we have a Britain first policy when it comes to economic talks. We should work towards setting that perception to one side by working with developing world countries to hammer out a better approach than those proposed through the Economic Partnership Agreements currently being negotiated.

I have been greatly encouraged over the last weeks by the comments that Gordon Brown has made about the need to look on the next few years as a new period in office. There is real and genuine potential for change, putting the mistakes and missed opportunities of aspects of our foreign policy behind us and looking to a new future where Britain can once again aim to be a force for good in the world. I hope to play a part in this process as Deputy Leader.

Thank you for your hospitality today, and I would welcome a few questions before we close.