

# Former British ambassadors censure Tony Blair



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Ambassadors to the Prime Minister, urging him to either influence US policy in the Middle East or to stop backing it. The former British Ambassador to the UN at the time of Iraqi invasion, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who was number 2 with the Coalition Provisional Authority for six months in Iraq, has reportedly endorsed the stance of his former colleagues and was late in incorporating his name with those of his former colleagues.

Initially, Prime Minister Blair told *On Iraq, the former* Ambassadors stated: "The conduct of the war in Iraq has made it clear that there was no effective plan for the post Saddam settlement. All those with the experience in the area predicted that the occupation of Iraq by the Coalition forces would meet serious and stubborn resistance, as has proved to be the case. To describe the resistance as led by terrorists, fanatics and foreigners is neither convincing nor helpful...The military actions of the Coalition

and Arab worlds... But the hopes were ill founded. Nothing effective has been done either to move the negotiations forward or to curb the violence...Worse was to come. After all those wasted months, the international community has now been confronted with the announcement by Ariel Sharon and President Bush of new policies which are one-sided and illegal and which will cost yet more Israeli and Palestinian blood". They concluded the letter stating

crunch comes in the last sentence when they state that the existing policies are "doomed to failure". It is a very serious indictment on Tony Blair's gullible support for the US policies in Iraq and on Israeli unilateral peace plan. The public letter is an unprecedented assault on the British Prime Minister. The former envoys including former Ambassadors to Syria, Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UN condemned Britain for "abandoning" peace efforts

Mr. Miles reportedly said that when he became "steamed up", friends told him to do something. He sat down using the Internet to reach his family and friends. He drafted the basis of the letter, hunted down telephone numbers and addresses of former colleagues and sent it to them. Most of them replied and offered support, in particular those who had served in the Middle East. Support for action continued to stream in up until the letter was sent on to the Prime Minister on 26th April. Mr. Miles has admitted that it could not have been done pre-e-mail days and certainly not from Tripoli.

## Indian polls

# West Bengal still CPIM forte

SAKYA SEN MITRA writes from Kolkata

THE people of West Bengal have always been very politically conscious. That is what indeed the leaders of the political parties in this part of the country say. The Left Front alliance has always been quick to point out that because of the conscious voters 'family rule' does not get a priority in the state. And it has helped them to remain in power for the last 27 years. However, in spite of that they have not been really able to match their Assembly election performance with the Lok Sabha polls. The opposition in the form of the Trinamool Congress, the Congress and the BJP won 13 seats in the last Lok Sabha. This time however, the figure will decrease. The CPIM led Left Front may well win around 32 out of the 42 seats in contention. In 1999, they had won 29 constituencies.

The main reason for that will be Mamata Bannerjee's whimsical policy. The Trinamool Congress chairperson in short has antagonised the voters to such an extent that very few will be turning up for her. Her decision to nominate Subrata Mukherjee in place of Sudip Bandyopadhyaya has given CPIM a chance to win a constituency in Kolkata proper. The three Kolkata constituencies has always been the stronghold of the Trinamool for the last seven years. The CPIM party secretary Anil Biswas has gone to the extent of saying, 'There is a very good possibility of winning two out of the three Kolkata constituencies.'

In Kolkata, in the battle of heavyweights, the north-east and the north-west constituencies have become the cynosure of all eyes. In the north-east, it is the sitting candidate Ajit Panja against CPIM's Mohammed Selim and actress Moushumi Chatterjee of the Congress. Panja has always been a favourite of the north-east constituency winning six out of seven times. But his decision to build a rebel Trinamool Congress party and thus earning the wrath of Mamata Bannerjee has weakened his base. On the other hand, Selim, the youth affairs minister in the West Bengal Assembly has worked tirelessly for the last five years. In the past, a large section of the Congress voters had voted for Panja as they felt he was their quintessential candidate. Not any more now perhaps. Panja himself is worried, but as a veteran does not demonstrate it. The problem, however, is that the Kolkata north-east constituency has 32 percent Muslim voters. And Selim is sure to exploit that.

The Kolkata north-west has always been an anti-CPIM bastion. In fact at times, the CPIM never contested on this seat leaving it either to Samata Party or Janata Dal. However, this time, the ongoing battle between Sudip Bandyopadhyaya and Subrata Mukherjee has made the CPIM very optimistic. Bandyopadhyaya was once the most trusted aide of Mamata. However, his close proximity to Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani, angered Mamata.

The situation in the past had been that the anti-CPIM votes always got divided between the Congress and the Trinamool Congress candidates. However, this time as far as the Kolkata North-West is concerned, there will even be a division of the Trinamool Congress votes. Which has opened up the door of opportunity for the CPIM.

The Trinamool Congress, however, is facing another grave disadvantage. There are constituencies in West Bengal where the CPIM and the Congress are jointly working to defeat them. As for example, the Malda, Raigunj, Jangipur and

the Baharampur constituency. In these places, the CPIM does not have any chance of winning. So their workers are quietly working on the sly with their Congress counterparts. The Congress won three Lok Sabha seats in the last election. This time they are confident of winning four to five seats. Former Congress unit president in West Bengal Soumen Mitra pointed out, 'Our fight is against the communal forces. The Trinamool is an ally of the forces that are destroying the country...'

As far as the districts of Midnapore, Burdwan, Purulia and Hooghly are concerned, the CPIM and its other allies hold the upper hand. Neither the Trinamool Congress or the Congress or the BJP can usurp their position. The organisational strength of the CPIM is so much in these areas that the opposition cannot even place polling agents in all the booths. In recent times, the BJP have been trying to build up a base in the Purulia district. However, it will not affect the results in any way in that particular district. If the CPIM is worried about one single factor it is the presence of the MCC and PWG cadres in the Purulia, Bankura, Midnapore and the Jhargram districts. The Naxalites may not also be able to affect the fate of the CPIM candidates. However, they will certainly create enough disturbance to keep away the entire population of quite a few villages from voting.

### The big fights

Mamata Bannerjee (TMC) vs Rabin Deb (CPIM) vs Nafisa Ali (Cong): Last time the margin of victory for Mamata Bannerjee was more than two lakhs. This time, however, that margin will certainly come down. Rabin Deb is a very tough candidate and has the basic ground level network to reach the voters. But then he will not be able to close the gap that Mamata has built up over the CPIM in the last decade. Nafisa Ali at the best can hope to finish a poor third.

Ajit Panja (TMC) vs Mohammed Selim (CPIM) vs Moushumi Chatterjee (Congress): Ajit Panja's margin of victory in the last Lok Sabha polls was a little over 40,000. The worrying factor for him is that Selim is a minister. Within his constituency is the Assembly constituency of Beliaghata, the home of the IT minister Manab Mukherjee. So Panja, now will have to fight the might of two ministers who will control a large section of the administration. As far as Moushumi Chatterjee is concerned, she will get quite a few votes simply because, there is a large Congress base in Kolkata north-east. Panja's return to the Mamata Bannerjee lobby has also not been very well accepted by the voters. But then he is the master of the game.

Dum Dum constituency: Tapan Sikdar (BJP) vs Amitabha Nundy (CPIM): The name of the Congress candidate has intentionally been omitted as this is going to be a straight fight between the BJP and the CPIM. The seat has assumed tremendous importance simply because Jyoti Basu wants it to come back to the CPIM. In the 1998 and 1999 elections, Sikdar won. Prior to that the CPIM had always won in this constituency. The CPIM had lost the seat simply because of the intra-party rivalry Nundy's greatest enemy has been the state transport minister Subhas Chakrabarty. This time after the CPIM candidate list was announced Basu mediated between Nundy and Chakrabarty and forced them to sign an 'uneasy truce'.

## BOTTOM LINE

The former British Ambassadors questioned the wisdom of Mr. Blair's blind alliance with the US President. No one has expected that Britain that traditionally led in shaping political contours in the Middle East has become subservient the under Labour Prime Minister's tenure to right-wing hawk policies of the Bush administration. It is extremely disappointing that Blair continues to pander to demands of the administration.

the media that he would reply to their letter, but it appears that he has decided to ignore their views. Some of his senior parliamentary colleagues counter that the former Ambassadors do not fully appreciate the "nuances" of the British foreign policy on the Middle East. This means that they basically should not interfere. On 29th April, the Prime Minister as usual robustly defended his stance in Parliament supporting President Bush in Iraq and the Bush-Sharon unilateral plan, replacing the much-vaunted "Road Map to Peace" of April 2003.

Prime Minister Tony Blair's uncritical support for President Bush in Iraq war and Bush-Sharon unilateral plan for settlement on Israeli-Palestinian conflict has disappointed and irked former British Ambassadors, many of them have served long periods in and around the Middle East. They argue that Blair's support for Bush's policies has jettisoned a long-standing principled stance of balance of British foreign policy in the Middle East. They have not restrained their views and on 26th April, sent a public letter to the British Prime Minister, addressing their concerns in no uncertain terms.

The public letter was signed by more than 50 former British

forces must be guided by political objectives and by the requirements of the Iraq theatre itself, not by criteria remote from them. It is not good enough to say that the use of force is a matter for local commanders. Heavy weapons unsuited to the task in hand, inflammatory language, the current confrontations in Najaf and Falluja, all these have built up rather than isolated the opposition"

On the Bush-Sharon plan, they added: "The decision by the USA, the EU, Russia and the UN to launch a "Road Map" for the settlement of the Israeli/Palestine conflict raised hopes that the major powers would at last make a determined and collective effort to resolve a problem which, more than any other, has for decades poisoned relations between the West and the Islamic

very clearly: " We share your view that the British government has an interest in working as closely as possible with the United States on both related issues, and in exerting real influence as a loyal ally. We believe that the need for such influence is now a matter of the highest urgency. If that is unacceptable or unwelcome there is no case for supporting policies which are doomed to failure".

It will appear that the words employed in the letter are quite pointed and robust. They seriously question the Coalition's muscle-prone policies in Iraq and reject the claim that resistance in Iraq is being conducted by pro-Saddam people. Secondly, they argue that the Bush-Sharon unilateral plan is illegal and will likely to inflame the sentiments of the Islamic and Arab worlds. The

between Israel and Palestinians and for invading Iraq without an exit strategy. Their views against the current Blair's foreign policy in the Middle East is likely to weaken Blair's authority on foreign affairs at a time when he is being criticised by many of his own Labour Party members.

### How did the initiative begin

It is reported that the letter signed by the 52 former Ambassadors originated a long way from London. On April 16, while visiting Tripoli, former British Ambassador Oliver Miles who served Libya during the 80s, watched the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in Washington and was incensed by his support for a Middle East plan adopted by President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon.

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