

Our fake patriots

Britain is fast becoming Bush's doormat
– so why isn't the British right saying a word?

The prediction was not hard to make. If Britain kept supporting the US government as it trampled the sovereignty of other nations, before long it would come to threaten our own. But few guessed that this would happen so soon. Long ago, Britain informally surrendered much of its determination of foreign policy to the United States. We have sent our soldiers to die for that country in two recent wars, and our politicians to lie for it. But now the British government is going much further. It is ceding control to the US over two of the principal instruments of national self-determination: judicial authority and military policy. The mystery is not that this is happening. The mystery is that those who have sought to persuade us that they are the guardians of national sovereignty are either failing to respond or demanding only that Britain becomes the doormat on which the US government can wipe its bloodstained boots.

A month ago we discovered that our home secretary had secretly concluded an extradition treaty with the US that permits the superpower to extract British nationals without presenting evidence before a court. Britain acquires no such rights in the US. The response from the rightwing press was a thunderous silence. Last week, we learnt that two British citizens held in the prison camp in Guantanamo Bay will be denied a fair trial, that they may stay in prison even if they are found innocent, and that they will not be returned to Britain to serve their sentences. There were a couple of muted squeaks in the patriotic papers, offset by an article in the Sunday Telegraph which sought to justify the US action on the grounds that one of the men had been arrested

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before. The story was spoilt somewhat by the fact that he had been released without charge.

But by far the most significant event passed without comment. Two weeks ago, the defence secretary, Geoff Hoon, told the Royal United Services Institute that he intends to restructure the British armed forces. As “it is highly unlikely that the United Kingdom would be engaged in large-scale combat operations without the United States”, the armed forces must now be “structured and equipped” to meet the demands of the wars fought by our ally. Our military, in other words, will become functionally subordinate to that of another nation. The only published response from the right that I can find came from Bernard Jenkin, the Conservative defence spokesman. “The real question he must answer,” Jenkin rumbled, “is how he can deliver more with underlying defence spending running behind the total inherited from the previous Conservative government.” For the party of national sovereignty, there is no question of whether; simply of how.

Let us imagine for a moment the response of the patriots, had these assaults on our independence been attempted by or on behalf of the European Union. No, let’s not imagine it, let’s read it. In April, the Daily Telegraph pointed out that a few hundred men under the command of the EU had been deployed in Macedonia. This, it feared, could represent the beginning of a European army. Blair, it demanded, “must logically reject the plans for both political and military union”. The Sun was terser. “The new army will need a flag,” it said. “How about a white one?” But when Hoon raises the white flag and hands over not a distant possibility of cooperation, but our entire armed forces to another country, the patriots are silent. Why is it that the right has chosen to blind itself to what is happening? And what does it take to persuade it that the greatest threat to national sovereignty in Britain is not the European Union, but the United States?

The double standards are baffling. A few months ago, Paul Johnson, ancient custodian of our independence, wrote in the Spectator that the world “needs hero states, to look up to, to appeal to, to encourage and to follow”. A sole superpower, he argued, “is a much safer and more responsible step towards world order than a corrupt pandemonium like the UN or a rapacious and blind bureaucracy like the EU.” It is better, in other words, to humbly obey another country than to participate, with negotiating rights and voting powers, in a system of regional or global governance. This notion reflects the creed of the Tory party, some of whose members have been flirting with the idea of leaving the EU and joining the Free Trade Area of the Americas. The difference between the two, of course, is that if we joined the FTAA we would have to accept the outcome of negotiations in which we took no part.

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It is the conceit of rightwing commentators that those who contest the surrender of British sovereignty to the US do so not because they are concerned about national self-determination, but because they hate the Americans. Their hypocrisy is breathtaking. On February 4, Michael Gove, in the Times, wrote an article headlined “The ‘68 reasons why Germany will always fail: Gerhard Schröder’s nation has not enjoyed a single success in 10 years”, in which he raved about “a historic weakness in the German character” and the “anti-liberal” urge of the German people to follow “a special path, a Sonderweg”. Three weeks later he wrote another piece, headlined “Stop the war! Give up bashing the Yanks”, in which he claimed that “In defining whether Britain is, or should be, closer in sympathy to the US than the continent, a host of prejudices is unleashed.”

So why is it deemed by the right to be patriotic both to oppose the EU and to appease the US? Why has the old reactionary motto “my country, right or wrong” been so smoothly replaced with another one: “their country, right or wrong”? Why does the British right now believe it has a God-given duty to defend someone else’s empire?

I think the first thing we must recognise is that the “patriotism” that informs the attacks on the EU is fake. The newspapers that are responsible for most of the hysteria about straight bananas and regulated sausages are owned and run by a Canadian (Conrad Black) and an Australian with American citizenship (Rupert Murdoch). These men seem to care nothing for the “British values” their papers claim to defend. Their conglomerates are based in North America, and they have much less of a presence in continental Europe. They would appear, therefore, to possess a powerful incentive for dragging Britain away from the EU, and handing it, alive and kicking, to the US.

American empire, unlike European convergence, is also unequivocally a project of the right; it establishes the political and economic space in which men like Murdoch and Black can work without impediment. But perhaps most importantly, our fake patriots know where real power lies. Having located it, they wish to appease it. For the very reason that the United States is a greater threat to our sovereignty than the European Union, they will not stand up to it. #

George Monbiot’s book, The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order, is published by Flamingo.