

23012 Millions of us marched over Iraq – and were ignored. Now we have broken politics and endless war

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No one can say they weren't warned. Mass opposition to wars tends to emerge only after they have been waged for some time, yet protests against the Iraq war reached unprecedented heights well before it began. [Twenty years ago today], on 15 February 2003, the largest demonstration in British history took place in London, attended by an estimated 1.5 million to 2 million people. It was also part of the largest ever international anti-war protest, with perhaps as many as 30 million people demonstrating across every continent.

The march itself was a carnival of resistance. There were people of every age, race, religion and nationality, from huge numbers of school students to members of the Muslim community and other faith organisations and trade unionists. There were tens of thousands of banners and placards ranging from "make tea not war" to "not in my name". Part of the reason for the sheer size of the march was that people thought that being there in person, as individuals, really could make a difference and convince the government not to go to war.

This turned out not to be the case. The march and the wider anti-war movement did not stop the war. And we still live with the consequences of both the conflict itself, and the rejection of democratic accountability demonstrated by the government.

Tony Blair's contempt for this mass expression of public opinion was clear. There were months of intense pro-war government campaigning, including the infamous Weapons of Mass Destruction dossier. The war was forced through parliament despite a very large rebellion of Blair's own MPs. He went to war in close alliance with the rightwing governments of George Bush in the US, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and José María Aznar in Spain. The war was a catastrophe for the people of Iraq, with more than a million dead and millions more displaced, and a country that has still not recovered from the war and occupation.

While the march itself did not stop the war – mass industrial action would have been required to do that, and while we achieved some strikes on protest day, they weren't sufficient – we did change public opinion. Because of the protests, every action Blair took would be contrasted with the large and obvious public distaste for the war. It is surely much harder now for governments to launch the kind of war seen in Iraq, with full-scale invasion and occupation. Interventions since tend to avoid boots on the ground, relying on drones and other forms of remote warfare.

422 words