

## LABOUR MPs TO FIGHT ON ANTI – WAR TICKET

By Andrew Grice and Colin Brown

Labour MPs who opposed the Iraq war are to defy Tony Blair by making it a key "issue of trust" at the general election expected on 5 May.

In a setback for the Prime Minister's attempt to "move on" from Iraq two years after the military action, 17 rebel MPs have signed a declaration saying: "I was and remain totally opposed to the war on Iraq. If elected as your parliamentary representative in the forthcoming general election, I will do everything in my power to bring the occupation of Iraq to an end."

The MPs fear a backlash from voters over the war and will try to insulate themselves against one by including the statement in their election leaflets. The rebels' decision to make Iraq "an issue of trust" is a coded attack on Mr Blair.

His personal trust ratings have plummeted after the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq fuelled criticism that he took the country to war on a false prospectus.

The Liberal Democrats and Tories will try to exploit Mr Blair's "trust problem". Labour officials insist the Iraq war is "fading" in most people's minds but admit many voters feel they "lost" Mr Blair to foreign affairs during his second term.

In a recognition that Iraq will be an election issue, a group backing Mr Blair's strategy of "moving on" has issued "lines to take" for Labour Party members. It insists Mr Blair was not backing President George Bush but the Iraqi people when he sent in British troops.

Alan Simpson, MP for Nottingham South and chairman of Labour Against the War, said: "The war and the leader are the biggest factors on the doorstep. Those MPs who opposed the war would be daft not to make that clear to their constituents. It's the biggest single issue driving Labour supporters into another camp - either the war itself or the question of trust."

He added: "At parliamentary by-elections, the party has pursued the Basil Fawlty line. The basic instruction is, whatever you do, 'don't mention the war'. But it's the issue that gets thrown back at Labour candidates on the doorstep."

John McDonnell, MP for Hayes and Harlington and chairman of the left-wing Labour Representation Committee, which drew up the declaration, said: "The war is an emblematic issue of trust. Central for the electorate is 'are they listening to us and can we trust them?' Anti-war Labour candidates will be making explicit where they stood on the war. In some cases, it could make the difference between success and defeat."

He added: "I'll be making sure people know my record in opposing the war. It is a continuing issue for a significant number of constituents and is not confined to the Muslim community." Ann Cryer, MP for Keighley, said: "Some of us made a very principled stand to vote, constantly, against the war at a difficult time, we now hope and trust that our constituents will appreciate what we did on their behalf."

Several Labour MPs who have not signed the statement will make clear their reservations about Iraq in

their election material. Des Turner, MP for Brighton Kemptown, has put a "personal statement" on his website: "I have consistently voted against British involvement in the war on Iraq, but I would not want my negative views on British involvement in the conflict to detract from my support for British troops who are undertaking a difficult job."

The Labour Friends of Iraq has launched an attempt to defuse the issue at the election. In a campaign pack, the group admits it might have been wrong for Britain to go into Iraq, but insists: "We are where we are. Today, almost everyone wants a sovereign democratic Iraq. The last thing the Iraqi people need is for us to cut and run now. If the multinational force withdrew tomorrow, there will be a bloodbath, civil war, the Balkanisation of Iraq and the end of the hopes of all democrats and progressives."

The group, whose joint presidents are the Labour MPs Harry Barnes and Ann Clwyd, Mr Blair's special envoy to Iraq, denies the Prime Minister is "just Bush's poodle", saying that he opposed the US President on the Kyoto treaty.

It admits "grave mistakes" have been made in Iraq but insists there are "many good news stories" to tell, including the removal of Saddam, the trials of Saddam and his henchmen, the return of Iraqi refugees and the rise of a free Iraqi trade union movement.