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HEADLINE: BRITONS LAMPOON BLAIR'S 'POODLE POWER'

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BODY:

Heard the one about the essay on Iraq written by a class of Telugu 13-year-olds last spring? It has apparently been found by some British officials.

Even as we speak, they're transmuting the essay into a new British "dossier" on Saddam's trickery and general tomfoolery with weapons of mass destruction.

Okay, so I made that one up, but it's nothing to what's gone before in Blair's Britain. For, a postgraduate thesis written in faraway California and based on documents from the 1991 Gulf War, constituted the bulk of his last intelligence-led "dossier" on Saddam's deception. That dossier was published, to general acclaim and American applause, on February 3. It was shown up as plagiarised and officially acknowledged as such on February 7. Clearly, this is not the right week for the British government to be talking about trickery and tomfoolery.

But they're still doing it. Or at least Tony Blair is. And though he has called-up 40,000 soldiers to ride out the challenges alongside him, Blair clearly does not have the rest of the British public for company.

How best to illustrate this? Opinion polls are thin samples at best.

And vox pops, as television and radio journalists call Joe Public's soundbites, are equally unrepresentative.

But the voice of the people smells more richly of the British stew a-simmer with equal parts of savagery and scorn.

That is why Blair was recently forced on live television to smilingly swallow a democratic choice of "people's" insults for the aura of "poodle power" he exudes in concert with superpower America's Bush.

In the ultimate indignity for a prime minister who keenly feels the hand of history on his shoulder, Blair was labelled "the Right Honourable Member of Texas North" and "Mr Vice-President".

The neat satire embraced two proud conventions, one of British parliamentary practice in which an MP is addressed in the House by the constituency he represents, and the other the American way of referring to the President's deputy. Texas North does not, of course, exist

as a British parliamentary constituency and the only vice-presidents in Britain are foreign bodies.

So is this the moment Blair finally stops walking on water? With his eye fixed on higher things, the wide open spaces of the world stage appear to hold Blair in thrall so much more than Britain's striking firemen, rising health bills, delayed trains, flooded rivers, snowbound motorways and spiralling street crime.

War, of course, can make or break a leader. In every opinion poll so far, Churchill has led the field in the greatest-prime-minister stakes.

Like Blair, Churchill never did talk much about making the trains run on time. But the country won't buy Blair's substitute mantra either: running Saddam to ground.

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