

The *Sun*'s anti-gay attacks on the British Labour government

A temporary fall-out between friends

Chris Marsden
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For two weeks, Britain's front pages were dominated by articles on the 'outing' of a number of government ministers. The sex lives of three members of Prime Minister Tony Blair's cabinet were subjected to intense media scrutiny. Their previously undisclosed homosexuality was made the subject of numerous derogatory and anti-gay articles in which no detail of their private and intimate relations, real or imagined, was spared comment and ridicule. Britain's largest circulation tabloid, the *Sun*, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News International, initially led the field in this display of often openly homophobic prejudice.

Events began to unfold when Welsh Secretary Ron Davies resigned on October 27. The previous evening he had been mugged by men he met on London's Clapham Common. When the police told Downing Street about the assault, and the possibility that Davies may have been looking for casual sex with men, he was summoned to a meeting with the prime minister. Blair feared that the exposure of the sexual orientation of a cabinet minister would fuel hostile press coverage. This was particularly true in light of the imminent publication of the government's 'Family Bill'. When this was first mooted at the Labour conference in September this year, Blair appealed to the press not to conduct salacious exposés of the private lives of MPs, like those which played a major role in undermining the previous Conservative government and its 'Family Values' campaign.

Davies was unceremoniously dumped, forced to resign his cabinet post and, a few days later, his position as Labour's candidate for First Minister in the Welsh Assembly, to be elected next year. Alistair Campbell, the prime minister's press secretary, helped Davies draft his resignation letter, admitting a 'serious lapse of judgement' but making no mention of any sexual connotations. But this only heightened press speculation over what he was doing on Clapham Common.

On October 28, while being interviewed regarding the Davies affair on BBC television's *Newsnight*, journalist Matthew Parris said that Peter Mandelson, the Trade and Industry Secretary and a very close confidante of Blair, was also gay. Parris writes for Murdoch's two major British dailies, the *Sun* and the *Times*.

Finally, on November 8, Murdoch's *Sun* attacked Blair at Downing Street regarding allegations made by the former male lover of Agriculture Minister Nick Brown. In response Brown admitted he was gay.

The *Sun*'s coverage was prurient in the extreme. It culminated in a November 9 lead story which asked, 'Tell us the truth Tony: are we being run by a gay Mafia?' The paper's political editor, Trevor Kavanagh, said there was a risk gay ministers would work together and the public had a right to know their sexuality. Another edition spoke of an 'over representation of gays at ministerial level' and 'gay proselytisers' in Parliament.

This led to much speculation as to why Murdoch's press had chosen to launch its attack on Blair. In some respects it is not difficult to understand why the Murdoch press responded to the Ron Davies affair as it did. After all, the *Sun*, together with its Sunday sister paper, the *News of the World*, has long specialised in stories of sexual 'sleaze' involving the rich and famous and is notorious for its anti-gay prejudice. Taking this into account, however, many commentators speculated as to the ulterior motives for such a campaign.

It is certainly not the first time that sex scandals have been used to pressure a government into taking a particular course of action, to warn it against implementing certain policies or even to mount an attempt to bring it down. The Murdoch-owned *New York Post* has, for example, been in the forefront of the right-wing campaign seeking the impeachment of President Clinton. Throughout almost 18 years of Conservative government, the *Sun* was the flagship journal for Thatcher's and, to a lesser extent, Major's political agenda. But once News International switched allegiance to Blair and New Labour in 1997, it went after the Tories with a vengeance, running banner headlines on every sexual peccadillo it found among their ranks.

Commentators noted that there are tensions between Murdoch and the Blair government over Europe in particular. Labour is believed to favour entry into the European Monetary Union. Because of this, a *Sun* front-page article last June suggested Blair was 'the most dangerous man in Britain,' and criticised

him for being 'determined to propel us into the single currency'.

Yet hardly had the question of what divides Murdoch and Blair begun to be explored than the *Sun* performed an extraordinary *volte-face*. On November 11 it solemnly informed its readers that it would no longer 'out' homosexuals in the absence of an 'overriding public interest'. Matthew Parris was sacked from his position at the *Sun*, but continues as a journalist on the *Times*. This raises another question: Why, in the end, did Murdoch call off his dogs?

Firstly, Murdoch never had any intention of doing lasting damage to the Blair government or helping in its downfall, as he did in the case of the Conservatives. No doubt there are tensions between Murdoch and Blair over this and that aspect of policy. But, if anything, the 'strangeness' of the recent conflicts--even the need to explain them--has only underlined the fact that normal relations are friendly in the extreme.

Long before the 1997 general election Blair and other senior members of the Labour Party began to woo Murdoch. They believed that it was impossible to gain office without this support. Moreover Murdoch was the personal embodiment of the big business layers to which New Labour was oriented. He was 'Mr International Capital'. If he could be persuaded that News International had nothing to fear from a Labour government, others would surely follow.

Blair told Murdoch that his considerable media interests in Britain would face a low-tax pro-business regime and would also be free from government regulation. This was a crucial consideration. As well as the *Sun*, the *Times*, the *Sunday Times* and *News of the World*, Murdoch's *Sky* television network has a dominant share of both the satellite and cable market. News International has also made a big push into Internet service provision and is determined to establish hegemony over the newly created digital broadcasting systems. Even under the Tories there were calls to regulate Murdoch's activities under anti-monopoly legislation.

Murdoch was convinced he would be well served by a Labour government. Since then he has, in general, backed Blair to the hilt and continues to do so. Blair has even issued policy statements through exclusive columns in the *Sun* and the *News of the World*. The most Murdoch would want to achieve out of an attack on Blair at the present time is to warn him that the interests of News International should not be ignored. That is why, even before the anti-gay campaign was abandoned, it stopped far short of what Murdoch's press did against the Tories in their last year in office. After Parris outed Peter Mandelson, for instance, the October 28 edition of the *Sun* ran an op-ed piece which said, 'Mandelson is gay. He also has a brilliant mind. He is also a talented politician. And it is also true that times have changed. The British people will not turn on Mandelson because he is gay. We say to Mandelson: Tell the truth. You will win respect for your honesty.'

The Blair government has made good its pre-election pledge to Murdoch. It has functioned as an instrument of the major

corporations, while imposing one attack after another on working people. It has, moreover, been anxious not to allow recent difficulties to sour relations. No official protest was ever made to the *Sun* over its coverage, and the ministers at the centre of the scandals refused to raise objections with the Press Complaints Commission. When asked whether News International's activities justified the introduction of a 'Privacy Bill' to safeguard against media intrusion, ministers repeatedly stressed their continued desire for press self-regulation.

Another factor in News International's decision to abandon its gay-bashing campaign must have been the inability of the *Sun* to whip up any popular support for it. Working people, including the *Sun*'s own readers, proved far more tolerant regarding sexual orientation than they were given credit by press and politicians alike. A Guardian/ICM poll reported that 56 percent of respondents thought being openly gay was morally acceptable, as against only 36 percent who did not. The trend was even more marked amongst younger people aged 25-34, where the figures recorded were 61 to 28 percent.

As well as this shift in social attitudes, the entire affair was viewed with suspicion. Most workers questioned the relevance of the press's fixation with the sex lives of politicians and many asked themselves what it was really all about. In this, there are echoes of the American public's reaction to the attack by the Republicans and the media on Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair. Once again the concerns of the media and the political elite, on the one hand, and the great mass of the population on the other, have proved to be poles apart.

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