Defection of Conservative MP spotlights rightward lurch of Britain's Labour government

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Britain's Labour government hoped to use the defection of Conservative MP Shaun Woodward to highlight his former party's growing extremism and confirm Labour's place in the "centre ground" of British politics. Yet Woodward's defection, whilst compounding the crisis within the Tory Party, has served to focus attention on Labour's own rightward evolution.

There is no reason to believe that purely career interests, as Tory leader William Hague has charged, motivate Woodward's decision. Woodward was a member of the Tory Party's parliamentary front bench until earlier this month, when he was sacked because of a row over gay rights.

He was said to be angered by the party leadership's decision to oppose the repeal of a clause (Section 28) in the Local Government Act prohibiting the "promotion" of homosexuality in schools. The clause has been used to clamp down on sex education in schools and whip up anti-gay sentiment. It was introduced by the Thatcher government during the 1980s, and has remained Tory policy ever since.

Woodward's brother recently undertook a sex-change operation and the MP has declined to answer questions on his own sexuality. He is also said to be disenchanted at the aggressive anti-European stance taken by the Conservative Party in recent months.

There is no doubt that the MP's defection was a carefully orchestrated publicity stunt co-ordinated with the Labour Party. It has emerged that Woodward had been contemplating his political future for some time and was already in discussions with Labour members. The day after his sacking on December 2, he held the first of three clandestine talks with Prime Minister Blair.

Writing in the *Express* newspaper, Woodward, whose wife is part of the multi-millionaire Sainsbury family, said: "It's not me who left my party. My party left me." The modern Conservative Party, he continued, "is increasingly right-wing, out of touch and intolerant... I, like so many other former Conservative supporters, feel our natural home is now a New Labour Party which is building a modern, prosperous and fairer country."

To back up this point, Woodward announced on Monday that his parents, both lifelong Conservatives, would also be joining New Labour. So far, the MP has not been prepared to test just how broadly his views are shared in his constituency, rejecting demands from local Tories that he resign and fight a by-election in the safe Conservative seat. Blair is said to be looking for a safe Labour seat that he can take over.

The Labour government won power in 1997 as the result of a huge outpouring of opposition to the Conservatives after 18 years of Tory rule. Blair has continued to utilise anti-Tory sentiment in order to defuse opposition to his government's own attacks on welfare and public services. The Conservative Party—faced with a government that has stolen its policies—has positioned itself further and further to the right, allowing Blair to argue that the only choice open to the electorate is between an "extremist" Tory Party and "moderate" Labour.

Woodward was formerly Conservative Party director of communications and has described himself as a supporter of the "John Major Conservative Party". Major was Thatcher's successor as Prime Minister.

Woodward is only the third Tory MP in British history to cross over to Labour. All three defections

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have occurred in the last four years, under Blair's leadership of the Labour party.

Blair has long boasted of his aim to create a new "centre-left" grouping in British politics, including Liberal Democrats and disillusioned Tories. Woodward's defection was cited by the Labour leadership as proof of the extent to which he is realising his project. Others within the party are far more critical of such a policy and openly question whether ultimately the Prime Minister's appeal to former Tories might prove to be the government's undoing.

In the *Express* newspaper on December 21, longstanding Labour MP Tony Benn voiced his concerns in an article headlined "Labour's elder statesman fears the implications of Tory defections". Benn warned that in embracing such Tory renegades, Blair was further undermining the Labour Party. "'New Labour' is in reality becoming a 'New Conservative' party, following many of the policies, like privatisation and support for market forces, pioneered by the last Tory government", he wrote.

"That is why some believe there could be many more on the opposition benches who would be happy to find their natural home with 'New Labour'", Benn continued. He went on to say that it "may be the real lesson of Mr. Woodward's move is that the Tory Party is being reborn under another name, and this will pose a real problem for some loyal Labour supporters when the next election comes."

Benn is seeking to close the stable door after the horse has bolted. The government's actions on every front—from their support for the war in Kosovo, to implementing cuts in public spending and draconian law-and-order measures—confirms that Labour has effectively taken over from the Tories as the main political vehicle through which the British bourgeoisie advances its class interests.

Benn, the longest-serving Labour MP in Britain, is well aware of this. For over two decades he has functioned as the nominal leader of the party's left wing. He recently complained that New Labour is "the smallest political party that's ever existed in Britain."

His concern is that by alienating Labour's former working class supporters, Blair is opening up a political vacuum on the left that can be filled by the emergence of a genuine socialist party. In this regard, he recently announced that he not seek re-election and would instead concentrate on his "extra-parliamentary" work, evidently believing he can more effectively guide the growing discontent with the establishment parties, and Labour in particular, along reformist channels from outside Parliament.

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