

British media and Tories defend murderer of 16-year-old boy

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Britain's Conservative (Tory) Party has adopted an openly racist, trigger-happy sociopath and convicted murderer as the figurehead for a law-and-order campaign.

Farmer Tony Martin was last week found guilty by a majority verdict of murdering 16-year-old Fred Barras. He was also convicted on charges of wounding Brendan Fearon with intent to kill and possession of an illegal firearm and ammunition with intent to injure life. He was sentenced to a mandatory sentence of 25 years.

The jury rejected Martin's claim that he had acted in self-defence. He shot the two after they attempted to burgle his rural Norfolk farmhouse.

British law allows a person to use "reasonable force" to defend himself if he believes he or his family is in imminent danger. But prosecutor Rosamund Horwood-Smart told the jury that Martin lay in wait for the two burglars and then shot them "like rats in a trap" with a pump-action Winchester shotgun as they sought to flee his house. Barras was shot in the back from 12 feet, falling through a window into the garden. Fearon, aged 30, although seriously injured, managed to drag himself for more than a mile to get help.

The jury heard damning evidence that the farmer was "eccentric in the extreme" and had long been planning to shoot a thief. The son of a wealthy fruit farmer, he lived at Bleak House farm in near-darkness and squalor. Martin, who carried a four-foot teddy bear to court with him every day, believed that criminals were targeting his property. He slept fully clothed with a loaded firearm by his side and had bobby-trapped his house to catch any unsuspecting thieves.

The farmer had also shown a propensity for recklessly shooting guns dating back more than 20 years. Six years ago he opened fire on a man who had

been stealing apples from his orchard—an incident that led to his shotgun certificate being revoked. Besides the illegally held weapon with which he shot Barras and Fearon, police found a sawed-off shotgun hidden in his garage.

Martin's obsession with crime was intimately connected with his right-wing political views. Trial testimony established that he approved of Hitler's genocide of the gypsies. He had been heard to say that if he had his way, he would round up all gypsies, place them in the middle of a field and machine gun them down. His uncle, Andrew Fountaine, was a founding member of the fascist National Front, and Martin was a regular visitor to Narford Hall, Fountaine's home, when "Aryan" summer camps were held on the premises.

The tabloid press has portrayed Martin as a hero—a frightened homeowner whose only "crime" was to defend his property. They have concentrated on the previous convictions of Barras and Fearon, and highlighted Barras's family background: the son of travellers, he had been expelled from school at the age of 12.

Following the verdict, the lead in defending Martin's actions was taken by the Conservative Party. Shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdecombe told the *Independent on Sunday* that in cases of burglary "There needs to be greater presumption ... that force is reasonable". Four ex-Cabinet ministers, Gillian Shepherd, John McGregor, David Prior and Keith Simpson, all called for more extensive rural policing because, "Many are saying that, like Tony Martin, they too would have defended themselves if the police were unable to protect them."

Finally, party leader William Hague used a local election rally to pledge that the next "Conservative government will overhaul the law with a strong

presumption that, in future, the state will be on the side of people who protect their homes and their families against criminals."

The most significant aspect of the glorification of Martin by the Tories and sections of the media is the elevation and legitimisation of outright fascist tendencies by the political and media establishment in Britain. Hague and company, besides pursuing a political agenda of strengthening the repressive powers of the police and the courts, are seeking to whip up fear amongst the wealthy upper-middle-class over the consequences of growing social deprivation and poverty. Accordingly, they have defined the Martin case as a conflict between property owners and the "underclass," and have shown no compunction in making a fascist degenerate like Martin their political poster boy.

One of the leading lights in Martin's defence campaign is Lord Peter Cadbury, heir to the chocolate empire. Cadbury donated £1,000 to Martin's defence fund and stated coldly that he keeps a loaded crossbow by his bed, which he would not hesitate to use.

The trial judge himself went as far as he could to solidarise himself with Martin. He said that the case served "as a dire warning to all burglars who break into the houses of other people".

In its April 23 editorial, the *Sunday Times* demanded that the Blair government act on concerns that criminals think "they can rob and intimidate with impunity". The broader issue, the *Sunday Times* declared, was how to deal with the "underclass".

The newspaper is hosting a debate in May between the right-wing American sociologist Charles Murray and Home Secretary Jack Straw. It approvingly quoted Murray, who speaks of "the growth of a class of violent, unsocialised people, who, if they become sufficiently numerous, will fundamentally degrade the life of society". This point has now been reached, the *Sunday Times* continued, when "burglary becomes so commonplace that the only purpose of reporting it is to claim insurance, not catch the culprit".

Such appeals to the most reactionary sentiments are rooted in the vast social polarization of the past two decades. This period has seen an unprecedented redistribution of wealth from working people to the rich. Beneath the surface of political life, social tensions are acute. Those privileged layers which have

benefited from the policies pursued by successive governments—cutting taxes for the wealthy, slashing welfare payments, lowering wages—refuse to countenance any reversal of these trends. Instead, they demand ever-greater repressive measures against the poor.

At the beginning of 1999 the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed to the significance of the Tories' unabashed defence of former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet, spearheaded by the Thatcherite wing of the Conservative Party. We wrote:

"The proclamation of solidarity with Pinochet by the Thatcherites is a threat directed against British workers that, should they ever dare to challenge the fundamental interests of the ruling class, they should expect nothing less than their Chilean counterparts. Britain's *Pinochistas* are unabashed in defending recourse to a military/fascist coup, mass murder and the suppression of democratic rights whenever they believe the threat of social revolution is posed."

Recent events confirm this appraisal of the political character of the Conservative Party. Today there is increasingly little to distinguish the policies being championed by what was long the major party of Britain's ruling class from those previously associated with extreme right and fascist forces.



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