

Growing disaffection with Blair government in Britain

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair is coming under attack, even from those he once numbered amongst his closest friends. On Sunday, millionaire author and Labour Party backer Ken Follett wrote a savage attack on Blair in the *Observer* newspaper. Follett and his wife Barbara, a Labour MP, are credited with aiding the Labour Party's transformation into the preferred party of big business.

In his article Follett said that Blair would be remembered as the prime minister who had made "malicious gossip an everyday tool of modern British government". The prime minister functions as a lawyer, and is incapable of making a decision that is not based on expediency, Follett continued. "He seems not to possess the inner core of strong convictions that would enable him to make a confident choice in a morally complex issue." He called Blair's press advisers "the rent boys of politics" for their spreading of black propaganda about those ministers they want sidelined for one or another reason. This is now so commonplace that it is "no wonder the public is becoming sceptical about the Government as a whole," Follett writes.

This fallout is symptomatic of more fundamental problems facing the government. There is growing concern in Labour's highest echelons that Blair is too mesmerised by his own publicity machine to see that his government is in deep trouble.

Labour's electoral support in its traditional heartlands is collapsing. According to an opinion poll conducted by MORI for the *Times* newspaper last week, the majority of respondents believe that Britain is as class-ridden as ever. More revealing, a quarter of all those interviewed said that the class divide had widened under Labour, rising to a third of working class people questioned.

The poll also revealed that Prime Minister Tony

Blair's personal rating is now at its lowest point in his six years as leader of the Labour Party, whilst more than three-fifths of the public are dissatisfied with Labour's performance in government.

In May, former Labour MP Ken Livingstone won election as London's new mayor on an independent platform, despite personal appeals by Blair that voters should reject his candidacy. Last month, Blair was booed and jeered by the normally sedate audience at the annual Women's Institute conference, for a speech that had been aimed at consolidating Labour's flagging political support in "middle England".

A series of recent by-elections has seen the Labour vote fall drastically in urban working class neighbourhoods such as Leeds and Tottenham. Only a few months ago, the Blair government had felt confident that its huge 179-seat parliamentary majority, and the continued isolation of the Conservative opposition, would comfortably ensure it at least two parliamentary terms in office. Now there are real fears in government circles that it could lose the next general election, expected next year.

These concerns are not prompted by any increase in support for the official opposition parties. The *Times* MORI poll revealed that neither the Conservative Party nor the Liberal Democrats have benefited from Labour's declining fortunes. Political commentators generally agree that the only thing Blair has going for him is that he is not Conservative leader William Hague or Liberal Democrat head Charles Kennedy.

Labour has reacted to these indices of growing disaffection with panic. Blair has ordered that more care be taken in spelling out government policy and his leading public relations advisers have been taken off day-to-day affairs to work out a "long-term strategy" to rebuild Labour's electoral base.

But no amount of carefully "spun" press coverage can hide from working people the reality of their daily lives—layoffs, health and welfare programmes gutted, rising prices and job insecurity. Even the government-friendly Family Policy Studies Centre has reported that under Labour "the gap between rich and poor has not narrowed", and was forced to criticise Labour's policies on welfare reform for trapping many in poverty. Similarly, the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, reported that it had ranked the UK twentieth out of 23 countries in its index of relative poverty—classed as families with an income less than half the national average. Only Russia and the US in the industrialised world have higher rates of child poverty, UNICEF stated. It also pointed out that the "current government had not narrowed the gap between rich and poor," and warned that "cuts in lone parent benefit and other changes will mean that one in six children in the poorest tenth of the population will see their household incomes fall."

When Blair took office in 1997, he claimed that his New Labour Party would create a new type of British politics—the so-called "third way". Its remit was never specifically spelt out, nor could it be. For whilst Blair used the slogan to try and put some distance between his government and previous Conservative administrations, its real purpose was to make clear to big business that Labour had abandoned its old reformist programme and any connection with the working class. Labour would continue to deepen the offensive against social services, welfare provisions and wages begun by its predecessors, Blair pledged.

Political commentators were greatly enthused by this approach. They hailed Blair as a "genius," because his "third way" apparently had something in it for everyone. He had shown that big business policies could be reconciled with social justice; at last British politics would no longer be riven by class divisions, they proclaimed.

The emptiness of this rhetoric is now self-evident. Despite the appearance of mass support its massive parliamentary majority lends, the government lacks any firm social base. Not only has its right-wing programme alienated many of its traditional supporters, it is no longer seen as a means through which working people could influence politics. Meanwhile, the "middle ground" to which Blair had sought to orientate

has itself divided between a tiny privileged elite and the vast majority—teachers, public sector employees and skilled workers—who share the same problems and concerns as millions of other working people and their families.

A terrible realisation is dawning within New Labour. Blair's supposed asset—his complete disregard for the working class—is actually his government's Achilles' heel. Earlier this year, Labour MP Peter Kilfoyle resigned from the government in what he said was a protest at its disregard for its working class heartlands. Now another MP, Andrew MacKinlay, has announced that he will stand against Blair loyalist Clive Soley in November as chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The virtually unknown backbench MP announced his candidacy by accusing ministers of being "arrogant" and "out of touch" with ordinary voters. One supporter said that MacKinlay was "not running against Clive Soley; he is running against Tony Blair". Subsequently, former Labour minister Mark Fisher has sent a letter to local party members in which he attacked the government for surrounding itself with "glitzy people" whilst being "ignorant of people on low incomes".

There are a great many Labour MP's who stand to lose their previously safe seats if working class voters continue to abstain. Despite the huffing and puffing, there is little that such complaints can achieve. At best, all they amount to is a call for Blair to better disguise the anti-working class character of his government's policies. But working people have proven to be far more astute than they were given credit by government and the media. What has been described as Blair's extended "headache" period is in reality only the first rumblings of social and political discontent boiling up beneath the surface. This might well prove to be one genie that will not go back in the bottle.



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