

Britain: Blair government caught in media manipulation row

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Prime Minister Tony Blair is under increasing pressure to sack a leading government “spin doctor” after news leaked of her email urging ministers to use the terror attacks in the US to “bury” bad news at home.

Jo Moore, a special adviser to Transport Secretary Stephen Byers, fired off her now notorious email less than one hour after the first hi-jacked plane had struck the World Trade Center. While millions of people were watching in horror as the twin towers began to collapse, Moore was busy calculating how to best use the tragedy to the Labour government’s advantage. Her memo advised, “It’s now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury.”

After several weeks of almost universally favourable press coverage of Blair’s role as America’s most “trusted ally”, the memo struck a bum note for the government; Moore’s cynical, manipulative tone jarring uncomfortably with the high moral stance the prime minister has adopted over the terror attacks.

Government ministers immediately denied that there was any question of using the September 11 tragedy, or the current bombing raids against Afghanistan, to cover over controversial announcements. However, such disclaimers are easily contradicted by the facts. Moore’s memo had alluded conspiratorially to “councillors’ expenses?” as one such item that needed burying. This was a reference to the fact that the government had reneged on a deal struck with the Liberal Democrats that all local councillors should be entitled to pensions. Subsequently the government had determined that only council executive members and key committee members should be legible.

Moore’s concerns for such a monumentally inconsequential issue intensified the revulsion felt by many on hearing of her memo. But her advice *was*

acted upon. The following day, whilst the media focussed almost exclusively on US news in the aftermath of the attacks, an official press release was issued outlining the government’s reversal on councillors’ pensions. It went unreported.

The government has rejected any link between Moore’s memo and the press release, claiming that the announcement had been previously scheduled for September 12.

Blair’s Downing Street office has issued several statements defending Moore, a former Labour Party head of press. The prime minister’s official spokesman said that she had made an “error of judgement”, which should be “kept in perspective”. Moore has apologised for her “mistake” in sending the email and has reportedly been reprimanded by the Transport Department’s Permanent Secretary, Sir Richard Mottram.

However, the government insists that Moore should not be dismissed. Blair is said to “highly value” Moore’s services. Unnamed sources have said that condemnation of her is “overly pious” and that as a press adviser Moore had only been doing her job. That she continued to do so, when others were held spellbound by US events, was a credit to her professionalism, they said.

It is certainly the case that news manipulation is not peculiar to the Labour administration. One former press adviser to the previous Conservative government has said that at the time of the Dunblane massacre in March 1996, when a crazed gun-man killed a teacher and several pupils, he had been told to push through information, which if released at any other time would reflect badly on the government.

But the whole somewhat sordid affair of Moore’s email does show the extraordinary degree to which the

Blair government depends on media “spin” to advance its political agenda.

Moore’s opportunistic response to the terror attacks was clearly in tune with the outlook of the prime minister. Earlier this month, Blair appeared at a truncated Labour Party conference to declare that the “war against terror” legitimised a reassertion of British imperialism’s military power across the world and to insist that government plans to curtail democratic rights and privatise health and education would now be stepped up.

Moreover, the government has indeed used the political fall-out from the terror attacks to release some of its most sensitive decisions on domestic policy—decisions of far greater import than a retreat on councillors’ pensions.

In the last weeks, Labour’s 70 “special advisors” have been hard at work, “burying” news, including:

- * Giving the go ahead for a controversial nuclear facility at Sellafield.

- * The appointment of Gavyn Davies, a key Labour supporter to head the BBC, breaking a rule on non-politicisation of the corporation.

- * The decision to abandon plans for a new stadium in London, meaning Britain would no longer stage the world athletics championships.

On the very day that the US began its bombardment of Afghanistan, Labour announced its most controversial measure to date—that the national rail infrastructure group, Railtrack, was being put into receivership, at a cost of billions.

Blair is having problems “burying” the Moore row, however.

It appears that Alun Evans, to whom the message was addressed, may have leaked the original email. Evans, a career civil servant, was recently removed from his job as director of communications at the Department of Transport after a dispute with Moore. According to press reports, Evans had refused to release a story seeking to discredit Bob Kiley—London’s transport commissioner who had opposed government plans for the London Underground—on the grounds that the story was “party political”. On Thursday, Jonathan Baume, general secretary of the civil service First Division Association, said that Evans had been badly treated. “Special advisers should respect the judgment of civil servants”, he said.

A fresh row flared up on Wednesday when the government publicly attacked the BBC’s chief news correspondent Kate Adie, suggesting that she had let slip on live TV that the prime minister was visiting Oman this week. Downing Street press officer Tom Kelly told journalists that Adie, who was in Oman to cover the war against Afghanistan, had endangered the prime minister’s security by confirming Blair’s visit ahead of his arrival. In an angry reply, Adie repudiated the allegations, stating that Kelly had “encouraged the broadcasting and publishing of the self-same apparently security-sensitive information”.

There are even suggestions that the attack on Adie was itself conceived as a means of burying something considered politically damaging—the row over Moore’s email!

Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper, on which Blair heavily relies for support, had planned to lead its Thursday edition with the Moore row. Instead, after being informed of the allegations against the veteran war correspondent, it changed its lead to demand “Sack Kate Adie”. Adie has since threatened to sue Kelly and the *Sun* for defamation.



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