Britain: Government and civil service at loggerheads

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Just as Prime Minister Tony Blair thought his government had weathered the "cash-for-favours" row involving Indian business tycoon Lakshmi Mittal, it has become embroiled in another and potentially more damaging scandal.

Centring on Transport Secretary Stephen Byers, and relations between Labour-appointed special advisers in his department, the latest controversy has caused most concern for having undermined the supposed "impartiality" of the British civil service.

Within days of the scandal first breaking, virtually the entire leading communications personnel at the Department of Transport had resigned, or had been suspended. Allegations were made that the rot led all the way to the prime minister's door. Adding grist to the mill, on March 4, a Labour-dominated parliamentary transport select committee issued a damning report, which accused Blair of undermining the democratic process.

The dispute began after reports were leaked that Jo Moore, Byers' political adviser, had intended to release embarrassing railway statistics on the day of Princess Margaret's funeral in February. Moore had previously hit the headlines when an email she had written on September 11 was leaked, which suggested that the US terror attacks provided an opportunity to "bury" bad news.

Moore had survived on that occasion, so allegations of a similar email revived demands for her sacking. She denounced the reports as "completely fictitious... complete and utter lies", but newspapers ran with the story that the spin-doctor was now seeking to use a royal death to smuggle out embarrassing railway statistics. The *Daily Express* and *Daily Mirro*r led with the story on February 14, after envelopes containing the leaks were delivered anonymously to their offices. The newspapers cited an email communication between Chief Information Officer at the Transport Department, Martin Sixsmith, and Moore, in which the former warned, "Dear Jo, there is no way I will allow this department to make any substantive announcements next Friday. Princess Margaret is being buried on that day. I will absolutely not allow anything else to be."

According to later reports, a hurried meeting took place in the transport department that morning. As head of communications, Sixsmith was responsible for responding to the allegations. He apparently told the meeting that the email as published was a "fiction", but was noncommittal on the charge that Moore was "up to her old tricks again".

Amidst allegations that something underhand was going on in the department, a government spokesman insisted that the email did not exist. *Mirror* editor Piers Morgan threatened to name the paper's source if the government did not come clean. The press reproduced an email from Sixsmith, although not the one originally cited as it was addressed to Byers. Within 24 hours, the government had announced the resignation of both Sixsmith and Moore, but his statement only added grist to the mill. Sixsmith claimed that he had never agreed to resign and that he was being hounded from his job. He alleged that Byers had interfered in civil service procedures to engineer his removal as the price for Moore's own resignation, and then to block his transfer to another government department.

At first there was a fairly uniform presentation of events by the media. Byers had gone against Sixsmith in order to defend Moore—an open and shut case of Labour defending its own against a civil servant who was honestly seeking to protect the public against further dissembling by Moore. But the contradictions in this presentation could not be concealed. The pro-Labour *Mirror* stated that Sixsmith himself was responsible for misleading leaks about the alleged February 14 memo. Earlier this week Ian Jones, Sixsmith's deputy in the transport press office, was suspended on full pay pending inquiries into the leaks. Furthermore, rather than being a civil servant of the old type, Sixsmith was formerly a correspondent for the BBC. An open pro-Labour supporter, he was drafted into his post as a replacement for Alan Evuns, who was forced out after apparently refusing to allow another civil servant to become involved in briefing against Blair's political opponents.

Permanent Secretary Sir Richard Mottram, the chief civil servant at the transport department, then issued an unprecedented statement cautiously backing Byers. Mottram said he accepted responsibility for telling Byers that Sixsmith had agreed to resign, but agreed that the details had not been finalised when the announcement was made. He went on to accuse one or more officials of "making mischief" by leaking misleading reports about Moore, and implied that Sixsmith himself had been involved, stating that he felt the press chief's position had become "untenable".

That internecine warfare has broken out in the transport ministry, and especially its press department, is not surprising. The government's transport policy is in chaos. Byers is regarded with hostility by millions of commuters because of the dire state of Britain's transport network. He is also reviled by large sections of business. Shareholders are up in arms after Byers took Railtrack—the privatised rail infrastructure company—into receivership earlier this year, after it collapsed with debts of £3.5 billion. Shareholders complain that the decision has left them high and dry and are pursuing a compensation case against the government.

The complaints by the press and the parliamentary opposition that Labour's PR machine is actively undermining the civil service also point to a longstanding grievance within sections of the ruling elite, which raises more fundamental political questions.

The employment of a large number of special advisers by the Blair government has been a bone of contention ever since Labour took office. Within its first two years in power, Labour had removed 18 out of the 20 heads of information and almost doubled to 81 the number of special advisers, or spin-doctors, as they have become popularly known, at a cost of £4.4 million to the public purse. Twenty-six special advisers work directly for the prime minister, who in a break with tradition has also given authority over civil servants to his two chief advisers, Alastair Campbell and Jonathan Powell.

The Transport Select Committee report accuses Blair of "meddling". "Never in peacetime has a prime minister gathered about himself such an

assemblage of *apparatchiks* unaccountable to parliament," it said. "A small number of people... with few relevant qualifications beyond the ear of the prime minister, second-guess the work of experienced civil servants." Consequently, civil servants' work is "inhibited by the attentions of the 'prime minister's department', and their time is wasted sorting out ill-considered interventions".

Blair has been accused of a presidential style of leadership, to the detriment of governing through the cabinet and other more traditional British methods. If anything, this understates the powers possessed by a prime minister, should he choose to exercise them. Whilst presidents in countries like the US and France enjoy wide-ranging powers—such as the appointment of a cabinet and civil service bureaucracy—they are usually subject to constitutional checks and balances including, most crucially, the popular mandate. Under Britain's unwritten constitution, the prime minister also effectively functions as head of state, exercising those prerogative powers formally held by the Crown. With virtually no actual separation of powers between the legislature, executive and judiciary, prime ministerial office confers similar possibilities to that of an unelected dictator.

Great emphasis has been placed upon certain unwritten conventions limiting the exercise of a prime minister's power, as an alternative to frequent demands for democratic reform of the constitution. Accordingly, it is claimed that the prime minister is selected by his party and therefore is dependent upon party backing, and ultimately popular support, in order to remain in office.

Similarly, the role of cabinet is to ensure "collective governance", whilst the civil service—comprised of professional administrators who are supposed to hold no party political allegiance—is meant to ensure that the state is professionally administered, without fear or favour.

It is against this model that Blair is tried and found wanting—his critics complain that with an overwhelming parliamentary majority, a neutered and servile Labour Party, an ineffective opposition and a growing army of personal advisers he faces virtually no restraints.

In truth, claims of a neutral civil service do not withstand objective examination. As a key element of the executive, the civil service is charged with administering and protecting a system of class relations based on the exploitation of the majority of people by a tiny wealthy minority. For that reason, its top echelons are drawn exclusively from the most privileged sections of society. The unique influence they enjoy in the establishment has been depicted in such popular sitcoms as *Yes, Minister* and the follow-up, *Yes, Prime Minister*. The fictional Sir Humphrey was supposed to embody the cool detachment of the civil service bureaucracy as it sought to rein in, and direct otherwise untutored and foolhardy ministers in the realities of government.

The Whitehall "mandarins" form just one percent of the civil service. Named after officials in imperial China, they are likewise selected on the basis of social background and loyalty to the establishment. And, if this were not enough to guarantee fidelity to the ruling class whose affairs it is charged with administering, their political backgrounds are carefully vetted to ensure there can be no conflict of interests—with a premium placed on excluding anyone with left-wing sentiments.

Within this highly circumscribed framework, however, the civil service was nevertheless publicly meant to be non-partisan. Civil servants, for example, cannot run for public office. This was considered crucial, not only to preserve the image of the state as an impartial arbiter between contending interest groups, but to prevent class antagonisms, and the competing interests within the bourgeoisie itself, from destabilising the profit system. In reality, however, the British state, as an executive committee of the bourgeoisie, is the specific form in which the ruling class asserts its common interests.

The very notion that it is the task of an unelected caste of state functionaries to act as a check on a popularly elected government is inherently undemocratic. But the myth of a non-political civil service has taken a hammering over the past two decades, during which the "party politicisation" of Whitehall has proceeded apace. The concept of a "national interest" superseding all petty political and social divisions has been progressively undermined as class antagonisms have sharpened. Indeed the bourgeoisie itself has become ever more sharply divided over questions of strategic orientation, leaving little room for agreement over what now constitutes their common interests.

Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's attack on the post-war social reformist consensus was accompanied by inroads into the civil service. For Thatcher, the extended period of class compromise had enabled the state bureaucracy to grow flabby and soft, whilst the expansion of the welfare provisions and public spending—her primary targets—had swelled its numbers. Anticipating resistance to her measures, in 1981 Thatcher drew control of the civil service into the cabinet office, under her direct command, whilst drafting in trusted special advisers and removing the "dead wood". The mandarins remained largely unscathed, but civil service numbers were reduced significantly—from 751,000 in 1976 to 476,000 by 1997.

Just as importantly, a new ethos was introduced that was in tune with the Thatcher ideal of "free market" capitalism, with the result that from the 1980s onwards numerous senior civil servants left state employment for the private sector—exchanging their intimate knowledge of government workings and contacts for a pot of gold. Of those that stayed, many became emboldened during their favoured party's four successive terms in office to be far more open in expressing their political allegiances. Indeed one reason for Labour's decision after it came to power to rely on its own people, as opposed to Whitehall, was a belief that many of the mandarins could not be fully trusted.

Downing Street has publicly complained that the present leaks are the result of a political campaign by Tory supporters working on the inside. The *Observer* newspaper revealed that senior government figures were briefing the media against "insidious influences" within the civil service, dating from the Tory era, who "put their own interests before those of a democratically-elected government". In parliament, Byers complained that he was the victim of a concerted attempt by a small number of officials in the press office to undermine the department.

There is a certain irony in the fact that conflict between the government and the civil service has reached such an unprecedented level under a prime minister who prides himself on engineering his party's break with reformist policies and adoption of much of Thatcher's pro-market agenda.

But as in so much else, Blair's political vision is myopic.

Contrary to New Labour's proclamations, it is impossible to please all the people all the time. Whereas Labour governments would once have faced a sullen opposition to certain reformist measures, today its critics have found its ability to defend bourgeois interests wanting. The Conservative Party may have suffered a terrible loss of popular support, but it still has a significant constituency within the upper echelons of society, who view Blair as incompetent, too pro-European and overly fearful of public opposition to his more overtly pro-business policies. They are, no doubt, using this support within the civil service and their friends in the media to undermine Blair. On top of this, divisions are almost as pronounced within the government and Labour Party itself, with the most important of these to date being a long-simmering power struggle between the supporters of Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown.

Alienated from the broad mass of working people, and unable to whip up popular support for their respective agendas, skulduggery and media scandals have become the weapon of choice with which various factions within the ruling elite fight it out amongst themselves. In such circumstances, utilising political influence within the civil service to discredit and embarrass the government is considered par for the course.

That the Tories now resort to such tactics is politically dangerous for the

long-term interests of the ruling class. For Labour to respond by publicly attacking the civil service, accusing it of a politically motivated attack, is doubly so. Most working people already believe that parliament has become an exclusive club for the political defenders of big business. The judiciary and the police are widely viewed with deep suspicion. And now the great myth of civil service impartiality is being publicly questioned. As a result, every central tenet of the old constitutional order—which once served to ameliorate social and political antagonisms and keep them within manageable limits—is being undermined.