

# Britain: Blair government under right-wing attack in "Cheriegate" scandal

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Efforts by British Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife, Cherie, to put an end to a ferocious press campaign against her have failed. The scandal over her alleged relations with a convicted conman led to her making an unprecedented public statement on December 10.

In her nine-minute address, Mrs Blair sought to refute accusations of financial impropriety, possible government involvement and interference in the judicial process. Whilst admitting to having made mistakes, she insisted these were due to the pressures of juggling her roles as the prime minister's wife, a leading QC and a mother.

The statement by Mrs Blair, who practices under her maiden name Booth, was the result of a campaign that originated with the *Daily Mail* and its sister paper, the *Mail on Sunday*. Traditionally conservative newspapers, the tabloids had backed Blair in 1997, but have become increasingly hostile to the government's perceived weakness, its pro-European orientation and an apparent liberalism on issues of sex and sexual orientation.

Their ongoing campaign against the Blairs has been accompanied by criticisms of other newspapers for being in Labour's pockets. The Conservatives have seized on the *Mail's* allegations to attack the government and to demand an independent judicial inquiry.

The scandal first broke on December 1, when the *Mail on Sunday* alleged that Cherie Blair had used the services of Peter Foster to help her negotiate the purchase of two luxury flats in Bristol. Foster struck up a relationship with Carole Caplin, Mrs Blair's life-style guru and close friend, within weeks of arriving in Britain in August. An Australian, Foster has been imprisoned for fraud on three continents and is currently facing deportation from Britain because he skipped the country in the 1980s to avoid prosecution over his promotion of a bogus slimming aid. Foster had apparently boasted to friends that he had used the Blair name to get a £20,000 discount on the £295,000 price for each flat.

The following day, the Downing Street press office categorically denied that Foster had acted as Mrs Blair's financial adviser and said that the prime minister had never

met Foster. Two days later, the *Daily Mail* published email correspondence between Foster and Mrs Blair, confirming his role in the flat's purchase.

Accused of being economical with the truth, Mrs Blair issued a statement December 5, in which she admitted Foster had helped in the property deal, but only because she had entrusted Caplin with the arrangements due to her own pressing work commitments.

Other allegations followed, including that Mrs Blair had acted improperly in using a "blind trust" to purchase the flats—one established with monies from the sale of the family's home when they first moved into Downing Street. A blind trust is meant to prevent politicians having specific knowledge of their own investments so that there can be no accusations of undue influence on government policy.

By far the most serious allegations emanating from the *Mail* was the charge that Mrs Blair had interfered in the deportation case against Foster, contacting his solicitors and checking the name of the judge that would hear his case.

The latter accusation, which threatened her legal career, forced Mrs Blair to make her public statement. In it she said the allegation that she may have been seeking to influence the judge showed how "frenzied" and inaccurate the accusations against her had become. She expressed regret for allowing "someone I barely knew, and had not then met, to get involved in my family's affairs.... Maybe I should have asked more questions, but I didn't".

Her statement was welcomed by those newspapers close to the government, but rubbished and dismissed by the *Mail* and the Conservative flagship, the *Telegraph*, which insisted that the allegations are proof of government sleaze and hypocrisy.

This claim has found some support amongst working people. The Blairs' private life has been subject to unprecedented scrutiny in the last days, presenting a picture of a self-satisfied couple with more money than sense and an inclination to all manner of esoteric "New Age" nonsense associated with mysticism. On top of this, news of Mrs Blair's efforts at property speculation and hiring Caplin's

services for £60,000 a year emerged at the same time as her husband's government was refusing to fund an increase in firefighters' pay and floating plans to hike up tuition fees for students.

Although the *Mail* is keen to utilise such sentiments, this must not be allowed to conceal the real aims of a campaign waged on behalf of the most extreme right-wing elements within ruling circles.

The charge of hypocrisy can be levelled with greater effect at the various leader writers and columnists who have feigned outrage at the Blairs' excesses. The figures being bandied around seem enormous to most people, but as far as the ruling elite is concerned they are small change. As one columnist pointed out in a somewhat cynical fashion, "While Cherie Blair lives in Number 10, she has the trappings of royalty. But being catapulted into a (temporary) economic and social stratosphere way above that which the Blairs generally inhabit has created a situation in which Cherie finds herself leading a 'borrowed' lifestyle. She moves with the very rich but isn't really rich. The servants and the address are borrowed—in this case from the taxpayer."

The Blairs' current personal predicament is essentially the result of their efforts to "keep up with the Joneses" and there is no cause to feel any sympathy for them. However, it is more important to recognise that this is not the first time that allegations of personal impropriety have become the basis for a right-wing campaign to either push a government in a desired direction or replace it altogether. The parallels are obvious with the Republican party-inspired campaign against the Clintons. This began with the invention of the Whitewater scandal and ended in efforts to impeach the former president over sexual relations with White House intern Monica Lewinski.

With the necessary caveats due to its British location, the same essential political forces are at work against the Blairs and the same political considerations are at play.

No one should confuse an opposition to the Blair government by working people hostile to its pro-business agenda with the campaign currently being run by sections of the press in the manufactured scandal over Foster and Caplin.

The *Mail* is targeting the government because it believes it has not gone far enough in attacking wages and social conditions. Their favoured government would be the Conservatives, but that party is in shambles. Unable to win support for a frontal offensive against the government, therefore, the extreme right has sought a more circuitous route of attack.

Paul Dacre, editor of the *Daily Mail*, and editor in chief of Lord Rothermere's Associated Newspapers, gave a frank

interview with the *British Journalism Review* in September outlining his own political concerns.

The interview was a diatribe against "liberal, politically correct consensors", and a call for a return to the Thatcher era. "I very much regret that much of what she [Former Prime Minister Thatcher] did is slowly being unwound."

The *Mail's* initial support for Blair had cooled because of the prime ministers "chameleon" quality he continued. "I do regret, deeply, that for many years we have had such a weak opposition", Dacre said, as it meant many of his concerns on European Union membership, national sovereignty and asylum seekers could only be championed by the media.

Dacre's salary has been reported as £727,000 plus bonuses.

The *Mail* has denied that it paid any money to Foster for the emails it published between him and Mrs Blair, but its statement avoided any mention of payment to associates or intermediaries.

Foster and Caplin have both hired top publicists. Ian Monk, who is said to be advising Foster, is a former news editor of the *Daily Mail*.

The blowing up of such "scandals" has become the favoured means for disgruntled sections of the ruling elite to press their case, but Labour is incapable of mounting a principled opposition. The forces now waged against it are those it has sought to cultivate through its repudiation of its past reformist policies and adoption of Thatcherite economic nostrums. In the process this has deepened Labour's alienation from working people. This renders the government extremely vulnerable to the political machinations of small cliques, with their own selfish agenda, as well as making it receptive to their demands.

In such circumstances the greatest danger is that the extreme right sections of the ruling class will continue to dominate the political agenda. The Blair government is busy preparing a major military offensive against Iraq, which threatens the lives of tens of thousands. Its social and economic policies continue to have a devastating impact on the broad mass of the population, under conditions where the International Monetary Fund and others are warning of a descent into recession. It is on these questions that the working class must take a stand against Labour and not be hoodwinked by the reactionary political manoeuvrings of the Lord Rothermeres of this world.



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