

# Britain: What Clare Short's resignation says about New Labour

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The resignation of International Development Secretary Clare Short from the frontbench of the Labour government on Monday, May 12, would have had greater impact if she was not politically compromised by her decision to support the war against Iraq.

Nevertheless, her resignation speech and subsequent statements have inflicted serious damage on Prime Minister Tony Blair and his closest allies and have brought issues to the fore that will plague the government in the months to come.

Short's broadside focussed on three areas: the legality of plans for the postwar Iraqi regime, the internal regime in the party, and the necessity for a change in party leadership.

Short famously criticised Blair in March for his "recklessness" in supporting a US-led war vs. Iraq without first securing United Nations' backing. She threatened to resign, but in the end supported the government's declaration of war. From that time on her position was tenuous.

She now insists that her support for the war had been secured in return for promises made by Blair and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw that the UN would be given responsibility for setting up a postwar administration. She also claims that advice from the Solicitor General that she had been shown, but which Blair was suppressing, had raised serious questions as to the legality of the war and urged that the UN be brought in at the earliest opportunity.

What finally convinced her to go was the way that Blair and Straw had gone behind the backs of Parliament to draw up, together with Washington, a resolution to be put to the UN which gives the allies almost total control of Iraq's new government—including the country's oil resources and the assigning of commercial contracts.

In a letter to Blair, Short wrote, "I agreed to stay in the government to help support the reconstruction effort for the people of Iraq. I am afraid that the assurances you gave me about the need for a UN mandate to establish a legitimate Iraqi government have been breached. The Security Council resolution that you and Jack have so secretly negotiated contradicts the assurances I have given in the House of Commons and elsewhere about the legal authority of the occupying powers, and the need for a UN-led process to establish a legitimate Iraqi government. This makes my position impossible."

In her 15-minute resignation speech to parliament, she criticised the government for joining the US in "bullying the Security Council" into agreeing to "only a minor role for the UN", and

warned that Britain was now making "a grave error in giving cover to US mistakes". She said: "I am ashamed that the UK government has approved the resolution tabled in New York."

Later in an interview with the *Guardian* she complained that Blair had failed to stand up to President George W. Bush and was not so much a poodle ("poodles get off their lead and jump about") as a fig leaf ("Fig leaves just stay where they are").

The prime minister's actions meant the occupation of Iraq was illegal and without UN authority and that the US and Britain are "occupying powers in occupied territory" just like Israel in Palestine. Without the UN on board, the coalition cannot engage in "political, constitutional, economic or structural reform, this is international law", she said.

The proposed UN resolution had been "knocking about, we've known it, between the US and the UK. In the UK it's been Tony Blair and a few advisers, Jack Straw and a few advisers. Most of Whitehall has been completely kept out of it, the Iraqi unit at the FO [Foreign Office], Ministry of Defence, Treasury and my department. Extraordinary, this is an unprecedeted way of working in Whitehall."

Short distinguished herself from many of those who have resigned previously by making a direct attack on Blair's leadership of the party and government. Until her resignation it had become *de rigueur* to frame every statement of opposition to government policy as a hymn of praise to Blair's personal integrity. In contrast she attacked "the centralisation of power in the prime minister and a small circle of advisers" who launched "ill-thought-out diktats". And she warned Labour of "rockier times ahead" under a prime minister "increasingly obsessed by his place in history".

In the *Guardian* interview, Short said, "The cabinet is now only a 'dignified' part of the constitution. It's gone the way of the privy council ... various policy initiatives are being driven by advisers who are never scrutinised, never accountable, in No 10 [the prime minister's official residence]."

"So you've got presidential style with a very narrow underpinning, with the built-in majority you get from the parliamentary system. I think we're getting a real deterioration in both scrutiny and the quality of decision making."

The third issue raised by Short explains her readiness to attack Blair's style of leadership. In her *Guardian* interview she made clear her desire to see the prime minister replaced as party leader.

She said that she had discussed her resignation with Chancellor

Gordon Brown, whom she is known to be close to politically, and he had tried to dissuade her. Her desire now was that Blair should only serve two terms in office and that an “elegant succession” be organised. “I think Tony Blair has enormous achievements under his belt and it would be very sad if he hung on and spoiled his reputation,” she said.

In the aftermath of her resignation, the party apparatus and a supportive media are working hard to rubbish Short as an embittered woman motivated by pique and so dismiss the issues she raised. This is not something that can be accomplished so easily, however, because these issues are fundamental.

Short is an opportunist of the purest water, whose occasional outbursts are just as likely to be right-wing in character as not—and which in any case do not detract in the slightest from her record of loyalty to Blair and his New Labour project. Even as she resigned, Short spelled out her intention to safeguard Blair’s “achievements” from his latest policy mistakes and more generally to save Labour from going off the rails. She insisted that “the errors we are making under Iraq and other recent initiatives flow, not from Labour, but from the style and organisation of our government.”

She may want an “elegant succession”, but whereas she may succeed in stepping up the pace of factional infighting, this is more likely to tear Labour apart than bring forward an obvious saviour.

There are no issues of principle dividing Blair and Brown. Although Blair is said to be more pro-European, the issue is nuanced. What pits the chancellor against the prime minister is the former’s resentment at being denied leadership by someone he considered to be a junior partner up until 1997.

Robin Cook, previously the most high-profile critic of Blair’s support for Bush’s war, defended the prime minister’s governmental style, telling the *Independent* that “he had always found the Prime Minister accessible and patient”. He said it was “odd” that Short had complained about power being in the hands of the premier and a handful of advisers when she was an ally of Brown, “who has achieved for the Treasury the same independence from No 10 that he himself has conferred on the Bank of England.”

In any case, the implications of what Short said go far beyond the type of internal leadership machinations she is seeking to champion.

Firstly, her statements on Iraq raise serious constitutional issues as well as questions of international legality. Though dismissed by the government, her comments have been seized upon by Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith who has demanded that the government publish the Solicitor General’s advice.

There is also the ever present danger for Blair that others more dangerous than the Tories will take up this demand. Antiwar sentiment in the British population has not gone away and hostility to Blair is widespread. Two days before Short’s resignation speech, the prime minister was voted the most hated Briton in a Channel 4 poll—beating his idol Margaret Thatcher into third place out of 100 nominees.

Secondly, whatever her intentions, what Short said about Blair’s style of government not only places a question mark over the future of the Labour Party but over parliamentary rule itself.

Her account of the bypassing of Cabinet and other government departments confirms that Labour has been essentially destroyed as a political party. What remains of Labour is a rump dominated by a clique around Blair. Having lost well over half its membership, those who remain—even when occupying leadership positions—have no say over policy.

But as Short also admits, this same clique, by virtue of an unassailable majority, is able to ride roughshod over parliament in its entirety. Though she does not say this, the situation is made worse because Blair’s parliamentary opponents are generally as right-wing as he and readily endorse the thrust of government policy anyway.

There is a name for the form of rule outlined by Short, which neither she nor any other bourgeois commentator will utter—an oligarchy.

Blair has declared his refusal to abide by the wishes of the people to be his governing principle. Short was one of those who supported him in this stand when he went to war in opposition to every conceivable expression of the popular will. But this does not mean that Blair himself calls the tune. He has his own masters. He and his clique—Straw, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, Home Secretary David Blunkett, et al—are answerable to the most powerful sections of big capital, and to Washington as the prime representative of the semi-criminal corporate elite that now rules world affairs.

It is in their interests that lay behind the war against Iraq and determined the character of the resolution Short now rejects. These same interests dictate every aspect of government policy as it seeks to deny workers decent wages, access to health care and education and undermine their democratic rights.

None of Blair’s critics within the Labour Party are any more willing than Short to take a stand against the essential thrust of government policy. They merely seek changes in emphasis or personnel. For the broad mass of working people to once again find a political voice to oppose the drive to war, colonialism and the destruction of their living standards demands nothing less than the construction of a new and genuinely socialist party in a political struggle against New Labour and all its defenders.



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