

Britain's Home Secretary Blunkett under attack

Chris Marsden
2 December 2004

The British media is in full cry of outrage and indignation—this time against the most unlikely target, Home Secretary David Blunkett.

Just two weeks ago, the Labour government announced its forthcoming legislative programme outlining one of the most fundamental attacks on democratic rights ever seen in Britain, including a (Draft) Counter Terrorism Bill providing for trials without jury, civil orders for people who could be arrested for being merely suspected of planning “terrorist” acts and who have not yet committed any offence, and the introduction of a biometric identity card establishing a central database holding information on every legal UK resident.

Blunkett is presiding over these draconian attacks on civil liberties. But this is not what has agitated the British media. Instead, his political future has been thrown into question after a series of deliberate leaks and revelations about his private life in the aftermath of a fallout with his former lover, Kimberley Quinn.

Blunkett had a three-year affair with Mrs. Quinn, who publishes the right-wing *Spectator* magazine and is married to *Vogue* publisher Stephen Quinn. The affair ended acrimoniously in August, and Blunkett claims to be the father of her two-year-old son and of the child she is expecting shortly. Most of the leaks against Blunkett emanate from the Quinn household, fed through extensive contacts in the media and political establishment.

Blunkett is no doubt paying the price for sleeping with the enemy, so to speak, but the allegations against him are relatively minor stuff.

The most serious is that he intervened in a visa application for Quinn's Filipina nanny, which the *Daily Mail* has alleged led to it being processed more quickly than normal. In an e-mail leaked to the *Sunday*

Telegraph, Quinn herself claims that in 2003 Blunkett “fast-tracked” a permanent work visa for her nanny. Blunkett denies intervening to get the application approved, admitting only that he asked a staff member to check the documents. An investigation has been set up by the Home Office under Sir Alan Budd, the former head economic adviser to the Treasury department.

Blunkett is also accused of informing Quinn's parents about a security scare at Newark Airport near New York, taking her to Spain accompanied by bodyguards, ordering his official chauffeur to drive her between London and his Derbyshire home, stationing a police officer outside her £2 million Mayfair home during a May Day protest by anarchists, having urged the US embassy to issue a temporary passport for Quinn's son, William, so they could have a holiday in France, and giving her a first-class train ticket that had been assigned to him, worth £180.

He has accepted wrongdoing on the train ticket and repaid the cost, but says the Newark security scare was already in the public arena, that his bodyguards were in Spain to protect him, that he was in Madrid on government business, that Quinn paid for her own travel expenses, and that she only had lifts in his official car on trips his chauffeur was already scheduled to make.

Throwing in the kitchen sink, Quinn allegedly also tried to get Blunkett to help author Bill Bryson's daughter-in-law get a visa to stay in Britain. Blunkett is said to have refused.

Quinn is currently in hospital, said by her husband to be suffering from stress due to the media frenzy and Blunkett having threatened court action to get access to her two-year-old son William and seeking a blood test to establish the paternity of her unborn child.

Prime Minister Tony Blair offered his full support to his Home Secretary, stating that Blunkett retains his “full confidence” and that politicians deserve to have a private life.

If the limited inquiry clears Blunkett, he will probably survive. But this is not by any means certain. The Tories have scented blood and are pushing hard for him to go. Shadow Home Secretary David Davis has said Blunkett’s position is “untenable” if it emerges that he helped fast-track a visa application by his former lover’s nanny. They have also argued that Blair’s claim that the inquiry will exonerate the Home Secretary has prejudiced its outcome.

In due course, the *Daily Mail* mixed its attack on Blunkett with typical anti-asylum seeker chauvinism, posing 10 questions to Blunkett, of which the very first was “Exactly how many visas were ‘fast-tracked’ along with Mr Blunkett’s lover’s nanny’s?”

No one emerges from this sordid saga well, least of all Blunkett. But the most sordid aspect of the entire business is how it is being used.

In tried and tested fashion, a classic sex scandal—liberally mixed with allegations of ministerial impropriety—is being used as a substitute for a genuine struggle over questions of policy and programme to deliver a blow to the government by forces in and around the Conservative Party. And this is being embraced by sections of the liberal left—who, it seems, are fooling themselves into believing that, whatever the methods used and the source of the attack being made, it will at least result in the deposing of a man who has mounted repeated attacks on democratic rights in the name of a supposed war on terror and being tough on crime.

A warning must be issued against such self-delusion, should it be shared by sections of working people who may themselves be enjoying a certain *schadenfreude* at Blunkett’s expense.

Nothing progressive will emerge from such unprincipled manoeuvrings within sections of the ruling elite. The Tories will possibly succeed in embarrassing the government and even in taking Blunkett’s political scalp in the process. But Labour’s attacks on democratic rights will go ahead and, most important of all, the working class will remain excluded from political life and forced instead to follow with bemusement the latest “revelations” of impropriety as

they are endlessly regurgitated by the media.

Indeed, it has come to the point where the media’s manufacturing a scandal that few believe to be the essential question in determining their attitude to Blunkett becomes the basis for a call for him to go. The November 30 *Daily Telegraph*, for example, proclaims as if it is an innocent bystander, “It cannot go on like this. The normal business of government may not be interrupted by a media frenzy on this scale, but the presentation of policy most certainly is.... If he is to survive, Mr. Blunkett cannot afford many more days with his dirty linen dominating every front page.”

And the *Daily Mail*’s list of 10 questions include the following:

“How much of Mr Blunkett’s time has been spent answering the allegations about his private life?”

“Does Mr Blunkett’s cancellation of a press conference on Monday prove that this scandal is affecting his ability to do his job properly?”

And, “Does Mr Blunkett think he’s lived up to the Prime Minister’s post 1997 election pledge that his Government would be ‘whiter than white’?”

After numerous scandals surrounding the government, and in particular the lies it utilised to justify war with Iraq, no one any longer believes that Labour is “whiter than white.” They do not need this to be proved by a trawl through Blunkett’s “dirty linen” by those—including his embittered ex-girlfriend—who share fully in the right-wing pro-business politics for which he should properly be condemned. What is needed is a political vehicle through which these policies can be opposed on the basis of political principle and not cheap moralising.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact