

UK Labour government wracked by Blair-Brown feud

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Ever since Labour came to office in 1997, there have been rumours of conflicts and rivalries between British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown. But over the last few weeks that rivalry has broken out into the open as never before and is causing serious concern in ruling circles.

The immediate cause of the escalation in the conflict is the publication of book about Brown by the city editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, Robert Peston. *Brown's Britain* (Short Books, 2005) draws on interviews with Brown's friends and advisers rather than Brown himself, but it could not have been written without Brown's cooperation.

On their part, the Blair camp is working with *Observer* journalist Andrew Rawnsley on a book that is expected to be critical of Brown. Despite the protestations of unity from both men, the feud looks like it will get worse in the run-up to the national election, which is expected on May 5 of this year.

The media is well used to Blair and Brown rowing, but has begun to sound the alarm bell. James Blitz warned in the *Financial Times*, "This time, however, things may have gone too far." The *Guardian* editorial wrote of a "potentially disastrous standoff." Michael White, the *Guardian's* political editor, cautioned, "The crucial fact remains that, like the scorpion and the frog, the pair need each other to cross the river. Too much treachery and they both drown."

Backbench Labour Members of Parliament (MPs) are deeply disturbed, especially those in marginal constituencies, who fear that their slim majorities may be eroded by public disgust at the quarrel between Brown and Blair. Senior backbenchers intervened in an attempt to stop the row. Barnsley MP Eric Illsley condemned the dispute as "bloody childish." Gwynneth Dunwoody told the chancellor and the prime minister to "grow up."

Despite these efforts, the feud has escalated. Brown's bid for the leadership has been encouraged by a shift in the polls giving him a lead over Blair. Blair can only muster a 23 percent rating, while 45 percent of all voters and 58 percent of Labour voters say they would prefer Brown as prime minister, according to a Populus poll published in the *London Times*. In Scotland, 60 percent of voters would choose Labour if Brown were leader, compared to 48 percent if Blair remains in control, according to

a poll in the *Scotsman*.

Blair has been badly damaged by his decision to go to war in Iraq. The disastrous course of that war, the deaths of soldiers, and now the release of photographs showing the abuse of prisoners by British troops have further deepened opposition. His indifference to the tsunami disaster further compounded an already bad situation for Blair.

Attempts to put a lid on the feud look increasingly futile as political, media and business figures line up behind the contenders. Former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who resigned over Iraq, has given his backing to Brown. Cook said that Brown better represented the public's views, "particularly that part of the British public who would regard themselves as traditional Labour voters".

The impression that Brown in some way reflects Old Labour as opposed to Blair's New Labour is well established in the media, but ill founded in reality. Brown won a certain reputation for himself as the author of a biography of the left-wing Scottish leader of the Independent Labour Party, Jimmy Maxton. His own history in the Labour Party goes back to his student days, while Blair is a relative newcomer to the party and very much an accidental figure. But his record in office demonstrates that there are no principled political differences between him and Blair.

As chancellor, Brown has been responsible for making the Bank of England independent of political control. He has kept the top rate of tax at 40 percent, whereas under the 1974-1979 Labour government it was 83 percent. He has championed the role of the private sector in the welfare state. His tax policies have destroyed pension provision for thousands of workers. Single parents and the disabled have been forced into low-paid jobs by his benefit policies. In his last budget he announced that 80,000 civil service jobs would be destroyed. This is not the record of a man who is to the left of Tony Blair, or even has any connection with old-style social democratic policies.

On the most fundamental issue of all—the war in Iraq—Brown has expressed no differences with Tony Blair. As chancellor, he shares the collective responsibility of the government for the decision to go to war and has particular responsibility for the allocation of funds to support the war. But he is now attempting to create the impression of distance between himself and Blair

on the issue. According to Peston, Brown proposes to produce a written statement “similar to a constitution,” and to establish “guidelines” for declaring war. Quite how such provision would have prevented the Iraq war neither Brown nor Peston say.

Two union leaders have joined the fray. Dave Prentis, leader of the UK’s biggest union, the public sector union Unison, told Scotland’s *Daily Record* that Brown should replace Blair as leader. Tony Woodley of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) described Labour activists as “disillusioned and desperate.” He warned, “Less people are attending constituency Labour parties than ever before, the public are concerned over the [Iraq] war, there’s no doubt there’s apathy.”

At one time the leadership of the Labour Party was in the gift of the big union leaders, and the support of the TGWU and Unison would have been decisive, but that is not the case today. In the final three months of 2003, Labour received £1.85 million from the unions, but that contribution was matched, according to the *Guardian*, by donations from just three multi-millionaires—Sir Christopher Ondaatje CBE, Lord Paul Hamlyn and William Haughey OBE.

According to the *Times*, Brown has been cultivating Labour’s fourth biggest donor, Sir Ronald Cohen, who is executive chairman of Apax Partners and is said to be worth £70 million. Meanwhile, another wealthy Labour donor, Duncan Bannantyne, who is said to be worth £130 million, has said that he will not give the party any more money until Blair and Brown stop their public feuding. Bannantyne has criticised the government over the war in Iraq and Blair’s poor response to the tsunami disaster.

Ultimately, it may not be the super-rich in Britain who decide who is to be the next Labour leader. The latest issue of *Time* magazine has the headline: “Brown for President.” They mean president of the World Bank. Only one thing is needed to complete the picture. Brown would need the support of President Bush, since in the past the presidency of the World Bank has always gone to an American citizen. It would, *Time* suggests, be the perfect opportunity for the Bush administration “to prove to the world ... that the arrogance of the last four years is over, there is no better way to prove the fact than by graciously giving up its ‘right’ to the Bank president’s spacious offices in Washington.”

It seems unlikely that Bush would find such generosity of spirit in himself, but the idea of easing Brown aside seems to be gaining favour. Bagehot in the *Economist* ran the headline, “Why Gordon Needs a Holiday.” The article warns that Blair has allowed Brown too much control of domestic policy and suggests that he should replace him as chancellor and move him to the Foreign Office.

Divisions between a prime minister and his senior colleagues are by no means unusual, but they are normally kept behind closed doors. The public airing of such divisions in the Brown-

Blair feud reflects an unprecedented situation in UK politics. The Labour government is heavily discredited, but there is no serious parliamentary opposition because of the meltdown of the Tory Party. The small Liberal Democratic Party has been incapable of benefiting to any substantial degree from widespread hostility to government policies over the war in Iraq and the welfare state. Not even within the Labour Party has any serious and organised opposition appeared.

The camarilla, the cabal and the coterie of hangers-on have formed the context of political debate. Experienced commentators recognise the danger that under these unhealthy circumstances, public divisions between Blair and Brown threaten the political stability of the government. Sue Cameron, writing in the *Financial Times*, warns of the government falling into a black hole. There is fear that the Blair government could disintegrate under circumstances in which there is no functioning opposition to replace it.

The political elite in the UK are conscious of the dangers of allowing the Brown-Blair feud to continue, but incapable of stopping it because in a political landscape that lacks any organised means of expressing programmatic and perspective differences through established political formations, what began as essentially a personal rivalry has become a focus for contending views on the many problems that confront British capitalism.

Looming over the whole UK political scene is the question of how to respond to Bush’s second term. Bush’s re-election has had a profoundly destabilising impact on the Labour government. The message from Bush inauguration is that he intends to pursue an aggressive foreign policy and dismantle what remains of the US welfare state.

Suddenly the stakes have been raised. Brown’s policies as chancellor begin to look too complacent. Blair and his camp have declared their intention to push on with welfare reform in an “unremittingly New Labour” direction. They seem to have calculated that they can hang on to office even if they lose votes.

Blair’s recklessness may have more serious consequences than he imagines, because by opening up the rift between him and his chancellor he may provoke a situation in which a more widespread political debate emerges among the mass of the population who are alienated from Labour and from official politics in general. Hostility to government policies on the welfare state and the war in Iraq might well begin to find expression under those circumstances. For this reason the Blair-Brown feud may well be the harbinger of social explosions to come.



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