

Britain: Blunkett forced to resign from Cabinet

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Work and Pensions Secretary David Blunkett resigned on November 2 after one of the shortest returns to Cabinet in political history.

Blunkett had been forced to resign as home secretary in December 2004 over claims that his office had fast-tracked a visa application for the nanny of his former lover, wealthy socialite Kimberly Quinn.

It was understood that Prime Minister Tony Blair would bring Blunkett back into Cabinet after the May 2005 general election, which he did. But Blunkett proved incapable of keeping out of trouble for the six months he was out of government office.

The scandal that forced his second resignation is over his violation of the ministerial code of conduct regarding paid work he took while not in the Cabinet. The code is voluntary, but requires that ministers notify the Advisory Committee on Business Ethics of any business dealings that may lead to a conflict of interests.

According to reports, Blunkett had been told in three separate letters from the committee that he should notify it of his plans on leaving Cabinet. It had even apparently been made clear that any such plans would be treated with kid gloves, and that he was free to ignore any advice. Despite such reassurances, Blunkett failed to go through the usual motions.

In December, he became an associate consultant to Indepen, which advises utility companies on relations with government regulators, and he also became a paid adviser to the education charity World ORT.

More controversial still was his employment by DNA Bioscience, which markets paternity test kits. DNA Bioscience is on a government-approved list of paternity-testing companies that is bidding for contracts with the Child Support Agency, which comes under Blunkett's departmental remit. He had resigned from the company board when he took up his new cabinet post, but had put 12 shares—3 percent of the company—that he had bought in the firm for £15,000 into a blind trust for his sons.

The £15,000 in shares seems like small potatoes, but on

the basis of its government-approved status, DNA Bioscience was intending to go public and the shares' value could climb dramatically.

Blunkett's employment with Indepen and ORT came less than 12 weeks after leaving the Cabinet. According to the *Financial Times*, "under the code, an ex-minister is normally expected to take up private sector work only after being out of office for at least three months." He is reported to have established relations with DNA Bioscience only two weeks before the May 2005 election. None of the jobs were reported to the committee.

For days, Blunkett attempted to brave any political fallout, instructing the trust to sell the DNA Bioscience shares. Prime Minister Blair had also made a show of standing by his work and pensions minister.

On November 1, Blunkett had defiantly told the media that "the prime minister has made his decision and, no matter what the Conservative Party want, I am not resigning." By the next morning, however, hostile reports in the media and demands by the Conservative Party for a full inquiry into Blunkett's dealings forced him to step down just minutes before he had been due to appear before members of Parliament.

Sir Alistair Graham, chairman of the committee on standards in public life, had said Blunkett's failure to take advice was a breach of the ministerial code. This put the onus on Blair, who as prime minister is charged with policing the code. Having earlier defended Blunkett as guilty only of making a technical "mistake," the prime minister pulled the plug.

Press commentary on Blunkett's downfall has generally been limited to examinations of his personal biography and failings. The *Guardian*, which has been the most supportive of both Blunkett and Blair, cited "officials with knowledge of the Whitehall system" saying "privately that Mr. Blunkett has a reputation among civil servants for wanting to ignore established procedures. 'He has no sense of propriety,' one said."

A more expansive comment by Jonathan Freedland

promised to explain Blunkett's demise as "a parable of New Labour...of the strange journey Labour itself made over two remarkable decades."

It did no such thing. Instead, while stating that "It is a story that says something about the state of the government," the entire concentration was on psychological explanations of why "the moral scold of old" became an "unlikely libertine," and someone who once cared only about "the rates in Sheffield" later "looked to make fast cash through, of all things, a paternity-testing company."

Everything was thrown into the mix—his blindness, arrogance, bad temper, his poor beginnings, the tragic death of his father, his (entirely misplaced) belief in his own moral and intellectual superiority, a bad choice of woman (Mrs. Quinn) to fall in love with.

"It is possible that this self-confidence fed a sense of immunity from the rules that apply to lesser mortals," Freedland surmised.

Personal weaknesses are, of course, an important factor in politics, but it begs the question of how someone with Blunkett's failings rose to the highest positions within government and what this says about what Freedland only obliquely refers to as Labour's "strange journey."

Many of Labour's apologists portray Blair's New Labour project as the outcome of the party's hijacking by a right-wing clique, but this was not necessary.

Blunkett's evolution from a leading representative of the party's left wing as leader of Sheffield City Council into an authoritarian defender of big business interests, hell-bent on personal self-enrichment, is indeed a parable of New Labour. He is only one of a host of former lefts, including Peter Mandelson and fellow ministers such as Jack Straw, John Reid and John Prescott—the list goes on—who make up the core of Blair's leadership.

Under conditions in which Britain's ruling elite was seeking a political replacement for a disgraced Tory government that was willing to continue the Tories' neo-liberal policies and dismantling of the welfare state, Labour offered its services. That is why Blunkett's former concern with municipal taxes in Sheffield gave way to a determination to defend corporate profits at all costs.

It is precisely Blunkett's arrogance, his authoritarian streak and contempt for those who "have not achieved at an equal rate"—as Freedland puts it—that made him the ideal choice for high government office. As home secretary, he was charged with doing "the unthinkable"—implementing a draconian law-and-order programme that rode roughshod over democratic rights. Precisely the same qualities stood him in good stead for his second ministerial position in charge of dragooning the disabled into low-paid jobs.

Blunkett's efforts to trade off his political position to

secure consultancies during his six months' leave from Cabinet was unusual only in that he did not sit out the customary time period. More importantly, such relations with private capital are integral to the government's *raison d'être*.

The conflict of interest cited in Blunkett's dealings with DNA Biosciences arises from the company's involvement in bidding for government contracts. But the whole of government policy is aimed at selling off the public sector to such corporations, and Labour has made it a practise to bring businessmen directly into government in order to facilitate this.

As for Blunkett's attitude towards the advisory committee, this is only a pale reflection of Labour's contempt for "established procedures" of a far more fundamental character.

Is it any wonder that a minister in a government that openly violated international law to launch a war of aggression against Iraq, and which has rubbished long-standing civil liberties as little more than illegitimate "old rules," could not be bothered to consult with a toothless parliamentary watchdog?

Blunkett has gone once again. But those that have forced him from Cabinet have no disagreement with the thrust of the right-wing policies with which he is associated. The Tories went for Blunkett as a way of weakening Blair and building on their attempted revival under leadership challenger David Cameron. Sections of the media share that same agenda.

As for the pro-Labour press, the *Independent* argued that he should go because he had become a "liability" to the government. The *Guardian* fretted: "one of the most worrying aspects of the political problems facing David Blunkett is the degree to which they are weakening his ability to defend a crucial new government programme"—the attack on disability benefit. The *Guardian* argued that irrespective of Blunkett's personal fate, these measures should be defended.



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