

# Britain: the political issues behind Labour's factional warfare

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9 May 2006

There is one extraordinary feature of the bitter faction fight that has erupted within the Labour government in the aftermath of the party's rout in the May 4 local authority elections. With the party seemingly in the midst of a civil war and accusations being levelled of a palace coup to depose Prime Minister Tony Blair, no one has yet raised a single political difference of any substance between factions grouped around the prime minister and Chancellor Gordon Brown.

Labour's drubbing was the outcome of massive popular disaffection with the government. The party has been haemorrhaging support ever since Blair defied popular opinion to join the US administration in its illegal war against Iraq.

In the 2005 General Election, the party managed to cling to power with just 25 percent of the national vote. The latest vote not only showed that Blair has not been forgiven for the war and the bloody occupation that has followed it, but this sentiment is feeding into growing opposition to the government's attack on democratic rights and its ongoing programme of privatisations and cuts in essential social services. If the local election result were repeated on a national basis, Labour would be out of office.

Far from provoking a reconsideration of any of these policies, the over-riding concern of all those involved in the internal party feud is to ensure that the hostility of working people to Labour's pro-war, big business agenda finds no political outlet. Instead, a contest between two right-wing factions is being played out within the exclusive confines of the media over who can be relied on to impose the dictates of the financial oligarchy.

Displaying his contempt for the popular verdict delivered in the elections on his leadership, Blair carried out a ruthless cabinet reshuffle to convince his media backers that he was still in charge and listening to their instructions.

In the weeks leading up to the election, the press had targeted key Blair allies—Home Secretary Charles Clarke for his failure to deport foreign nationals after their release from prison and Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott over an

extra-marital affair. In addition, Washington had reportedly registered its displeasure at Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's description of any military attack on Iran as "nuts."

Even though they have been amongst his most loyal backers, Blair sacked Clarke, stripped Prescott of most of his powers and demoted Straw.

The cabinet was stacked with Blair loyalists, including Alan Johnson and David Miliband, who are both seen as potential leadership contenders against Brown.

This manoeuvre galvanised opposition amongst disgruntled MPs who concluded that Blair had no intention of stepping down. Encouraged by the media's negative reaction to the reshuffle and editorials insisting that Blair's time was up, there were reports of letters being circulated calling for the prime minister to set a timetable for an "orderly transition" to Brown and even of a potential leadership challenge.

What happened next was highly revealing. In a counter-attack, Blair let it be known to Brown's supporters within the party and the media that they were playing with fire. In their haste to remove him from power, they risked providing an opening to the very political forces New Labour had been created to suppress.

Brown was scheduled to appear on BBC television Sunday morning, where he was expected to make a public call for Blair to set a timetable for his departure. But just hours before his interview began, Blair's press chief David Hill sent a text message to the BBC, denouncing Brown as a stalking horse for left-wing forces within the party out to undo the entire New Labour project. "My view is that there is a move to unseat the PM and reverse the Blairite reforms," the text read.

Put on the back foot, in his television interview Brown himself warned against "outriders dictating the agenda": "I have been in politics long enough and I have seen throughout the past 25 years when the Labour party divides and extremists take over, and the moderates lose control, that is a recipe for disaster."

Later that day, Blair's newly appointed Home Secretary,

John Reid, gave a radio interview that also warned that the prime minister was the target of a left-wing coup attempt by people within the Compass group who “want to stop the reform programme and go back to Old Labour.”

Such claims of a left-wing coup are absurd. Compass is a loose association of time-served apparatchiks and policy advisers, some of whom are close to the trade union bureaucracy, who want to “rejuvenate” New Labour in an as-yet-unspecified manner but with no question of a return to the party’s previously reformist policies.

Nevertheless, Blair’s aim was to secure the continued loyalty of the Brownites and more recently disaffected MPs by playing to their own worst fears.

The essential feature of the New Labour project has been to exclude the working class from political life. And whereas Brown is well aware that claim of a left-wing threat within the Labour Party is a fiction, nothing is more guaranteed to provoke consternation within the entire party bureaucracy than the possibility of political instability undermining its present monopoly of power.

Moreover, without the backing of the ruling elite and its media—particularly Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation stable—the Labourites are well aware that they will never form a government, whoever is prime minister.

On this front, Blair’s scaremongering was effective. Previously, the discussion in the media was proceeding along set lines—whether Brown should be entrusted with heading a further term in office for Labour, or whether David Cameron and the Conservatives could replace them.

The raising of a left-wing bogeyman served as a reminder that Blair was not the only one who stood to lose. Under conditions of widespread political disaffection from all the official parties, it amounted to a warning: “Après moi le deluge.”

Hence, while the *Sunday Times* had editorialised “Blair must go” and described his efforts to remain in office as “delusional,” Monday’s *Times* stressed that “Gordon Brown needs to avoid becoming a prisoner of the Left.” Those opposing the prime minister constituted “an embittered faction hostile to everything that new Labour has ever stood for.... Precisely because of this, the Chancellor should be wary of his would-be champions.”

The same line was taken by the *Sun*, while the pro-Labour *Guardian* editorialised that Brown, “quite rightly does not want to capture the leadership at the head of an avenging army of Labour leftists,” the mere suggestion of which “would be a recipe for disaster.” With the *Independent* refusing to take a position, this left only the avowedly Conservative press calling for Blair to go immediately.

That same day Blair appeared before the media to declare that he would not set a date for his departure, whilst

promising Brown and his critics to give “the time properly needed for my successor to establish himself.”

It remains to be seen whether Blair has done enough to head off an immediate challenge to his leadership. But his attempts to do so have at least demonstrated that despite all the tensions within New Labour and ruling circles in general, there is a shared determination to preserve the political disenfranchisement of working people.

Politics has become the exclusive domain of contending right-wing factions, whose disagreements are of a purely tactical and even subjective character and which are pursued by methods akin to palace intrigue.

This is a recipe for continuing dysfunction and instability. The problems besetting the government cannot be resolved by replacing Blair. Even if he were prepared to fall on his sword, this would satisfy no one outside of the party apparatus.

Blair is hated because he embodies the political and class imperatives shared by the entire New Labour clique. He was able to refashion the party as the favoured political vehicle of big business by appealing to the selfish interests of the privileged social strata that makes up the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Many of them have grown rich by exploiting links with big business and have no intention of biting the hand that feeds them.

If Blair were pushed to one side, Labour would continue to pursue an aggressive military policy abroad and a regressive economic and social agenda at home. Those now lining up against him are merely attempting to repackage policies that are antithetical to the interests of broad masses of the population and for which it is impossible to secure any democratic mandate.

What is required is not a change of party leader or political direction for New Labour, but the building of a new socialist party of the working class.



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