

Britain: Former home secretary Charles Clarke questions Blair's survival

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The crisis within the British Labour Party and the government of Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair has intensified with a series of statements by former home secretary Charles Clarke.

Clarke was sacked last May after a media campaign, led by Rupert Murdoch's News International, which accused him of not acting swiftly enough to deport foreign prisoners convicted of criminal offences.

He was then hung out to dry by his successor, John Reid, who blamed Clarke for the scandal and implied that his poor leadership was responsible for a Home Office that was "not fit for purpose."

Such attacks have finally proved too much for Clarke, formerly one of Blair's staunchest allies. Interviewed on the BBC and in the *Times* newspaper, Clarke said he had decided to speak out to save his reputation, and that the decision to sack him had been taken out of political expediency at the expense of the long-term reform of the Home Office.

Although he still believed that Blair should continue as Labour leader until late 2008, he was uncertain as to whether this was possible. Blair had been so "damaged by recent events" that there were "a lot of doubts," which he shared, as to whether he could recover his "leadership and authority and direction" and last the course.

Clarke also criticized Reid, who has said, following a campaign by Murdoch's *News of the World*, that he will consider introducing new measures to "name and shame" sex offenders. "The home secretary of the day should not simply be running on the band wagon of some particular media campaign," Clarke said.

Perhaps just as damaging, Clarke refuted Blair's claim that he (Blair) had been unaware that some 1,000 foreign prisoners had been released without being considered for deportation. In a letter to the Home

Affairs Committee, which is investigating the prisoner release, Clarke stated that he had raised his concerns about the issue with the prime minister on November 16, 2005.

"As I am sure the record of that meeting would show," he continued, "I explained to him that I was urgently exploring options for reducing the number of foreign nationals in prisons and said that I would come back to this when firm proposals had been developed."

Clarke, one of the key architects of "New Labour," served Blair for nine years in leading positions, including education secretary and, finally, home secretary. A committed supporter of Labour's big business agenda, he piloted as home secretary some of the most draconian attacks on civil liberties, under the guise of the "war on terror," including the undermining of *habeas corpus* and efforts to introduce identity cards.

Some in the media saw Clarke's statements as a rerun of the attack made by Geoffrey Howe on Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1990, which triggered behind-the-scenes maneuvers that led to her removal as Conservative Party leader and prime minister.

Howe served Thatcher as chancellor, foreign secretary, leader of the House of Commons and deputy prime minister. But, in protest at Thatcher's anti-European stance which had left Britain increasingly isolated on the continent, he resigned from the cabinet on November 1, 1990. In his resignation speech before parliament, Howe attacked Thatcher for sabotaging British interests and called on other Tory MPs to "consider their own response to the tragic conflict of loyalties with which I have myself wrestled for perhaps too long." Thatcher was out within one month.

In contrast, at no time in his statements and interviews did Clarke express any political

disagreements with the government's course. And his suggestion of a 2008 deadline for Blair's departure does not suggest that Clarke intends any serious challenge to his leadership. Nevertheless, by giving his blessings to Chancellor Gordon Brown's succession—Clarke said he would be "happy" to see the chancellor in Number 10—the former home secretary has ratcheted up the factional warfare within New Labour.

To some extent, the absence of any political substance to the faction fight between Blair's supporters on the one side and Brown's on the other makes the internal party dispute all the more incendiary. Not only Blair, but the entire New Labour project has been profoundly discredited. Its claim that it was possible to reconcile the interests of big business and the rich with the social needs of working people has been exposed as a sham.

Whilst the super-rich have enjoyed a financial bonanza under Labour, many families are burdened with record levels of debt, whilst the public services on which they depend are being undermined and hived off to the private sector.

The Iraq war remains a key focus of public hostility to the government. The fact that Blair lied about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction to justify joining the Bush administration in its pre-emptive war of aggression has destroyed his government's credibility. As the ongoing occupation of the country becomes ever bloodier, popular opposition to Blair's imperialist agenda has become more entrenched.

In local authority elections in May, Labour's vote fell to a historic low, and it dropped into third place behind the Tories and Liberal Democrats. Public disaffection from official politics has led many commentators to predict the general election due in 2009 will result in a hung parliament.

Labour has long been indifferent to popular opinion. Indeed, its ability to function as the political representative of the super-rich and the transnational corporations has depended entirely on its efforts to distance itself from any form of popular, democratic control. In the run-up to the Iraq war, Blair proclaimed his readiness to ride roughshod over the wishes of the majority of working people as the defining characteristic of his administration.

But Blair is now so despised that some within the

ruling elite are casting their eyes toward the new Tory leader, David Cameron, in the hope that his "compassionate Conservatism" will better serve their ends.

In his effort to reinforce his political credentials with the likes of Murdoch, Blair has made clear nothing will stand in his way—not personal loyalty and certainly not political principle.

Reid's public denigration of the Home Office has been followed by virulent attacks on sections of the judiciary, the police and others deemed by the right wing press to be "soft" on crime or too cautious in backing Blair's privatisation of the public sector.

As a result, the current government has become a major destabilizing factor in the institutions of rule.

In recent weeks several leading judges and police chiefs have attacked the government's recklessness in trying to assuage its media critics. Referring to Reid's announcement that he would look at publicly branding sex offenders, Chief Constable Terry Grange said he was concerned that the home office had "surrendered" power over policy to the *News of the World*.

"This government has accepted the principle that they are prepared to be blackmailed," he said, adding that it was "impossible" for his force to work coherently when every few weeks "there is a policy change or reaction brought about by pressure from the media."

Earlier, the former chief inspector of prisons, Lord Ramsbotham, complained that Blair's pronouncements on law and order were undermining public confidence in the judicial system, and he urged the prime minister to "shut up."



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