

Families of UK soldiers killed in Iraq mount political, legal challenge to Blair government

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Relatives of some of the 115 British soldiers killed in Iraq have announced their intention to form a new political party to contest parliamentary elections.

The decision to launch the new party—to be called Spectre—was announced by Reg Keys, whose son Lance Corporal Thomas Keys, 20, was killed along with five other Royal Military Police soldiers at an Iraqi police station in Al-Majar Al-Kabir in June 2003.

Keys stood against Prime Minister Tony Blair in last year's general election. He says that Spectre hopes to field upwards of 70 candidates, targeting those politicians the families hold culpable for the deaths of their sons in an illegal war.

"Every time you see news of more deaths, it just brings it all back and you realise that some family's nightmare is just beginning," said Keys. "We know how those families will be feeling. We all feel we've been lied to, ignored and, frankly, insulted. But now it's different. Now we're going to make ministers pay with their seats.

"All the parents of the soldiers killed are angry. If Thomas had been fighting for his country in a legal war, then you wouldn't be hearing from me. But we were lied to. Saddam didn't have weapons of mass destruction; he was no threat to us. So we feel those lives were lost for nothing."

Keys said 20 people who had been bereaved by the Iraq war had signed up for Spectre. They include Rose Gentle, whose 19-year-old son Gordon was killed by a roadside bomb in Basra in 2004. Gentle has been an active campaigner against government supporters of the Iraq war, and previously stood as an independent candidate against Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram.

She said, "I'm getting between 200 and 300 e-mails a day from bereaved families, concerned military

families and serving soldiers who all feel angry at the way we have been lied to.... This movement is growing and by forming a political party we'll have a focus of that anger."

The new party is to be formally established later this month. In addition to Keys and Gentle, Spectre has the support of Mike Aston (whose son Russell died alongside Thomas Keys), Peter Brierley (whose son Shaun died in Kuwait in 2003), Susan Smith (whose son Phillip died in a roadside bombing last year), and Beverley Clarke (who lost her son David to "friendly fire" in 2003).

Spectre candidates are to target pro-war ministers with small majorities. Among those who could be vulnerable are Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett, former foreign secretary and currently leader of the Commons Jack Straw, and Ruth Kelly, the communities and local government secretary.

Keys said he accepted that it was possible that Blair may stand down as Labour Party leader before the next general election, but said "it will still be his ministers that will be in situ.

"Whoever voted for this war, whoever supported it will find a Spectre candidate standing against them at the general election or any forthcoming by-elections.

"The majority of people in this country now believe that the war in Iraq was wrong, and I do believe we will get support."

The move coincided with news that several of the families had made an important legal breakthrough in their bid to force a full public inquiry into why Britain joined the US-led war in Iraq. The legal action was brought by relatives of four servicemen who died in military action in Iraq between 2003 and 2005: Peter Brierley, Beverley Clarke, Susan Smith and Rose Gentle.

At the end of July, the Court of Appeal in London ruled that the families are entitled to apply for a judicial review of the government's refusal to hold an independent inquiry into the decision to go to war. The decision reversed a ruling last December, when a High Court judge said that the families did not have an arguable case.

The Court of Appeal's judgement does not mean that the families will be successful. The government has made plain that it will fight any such review. Speaking after the appeal court's ruling, a government spokesman said the families' case was without "legal merit" and that "issues relating to the use of armed force are fundamentally matters for the elected government to decide, not for determination by the courts."

The appeal court judges also warned the applicants that the odds were against them. Their statement warned, "We stress that, although we have decided to grant permission, we see formidable hurdles in the way of the applicants and do not wish to encourage them to think that they will succeed."

Echoing the government spokesman, the court statement said military issues were "essentially matters for the executive and Parliament." But permission to appeal was being granted "because the case raises questions of considerable general importance which should, we think, be decided after full argument."

Phil Shiner, solicitor for the families, described the ruling as an "a stunning victory." He said political pressure from Blair and his government had, prior to the war, forced a change in legal advice, authorising the invasion, with the result that soldiers were sent "to their deaths."

A full hearing will take place before the same judges over two or three days, beginning on November 6.



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