

Britain: Brown forms government including Liberals, ex-Conservatives, business, military and police figures

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Gordon Brown's first act as the new British prime minister—the selection of his cabinet—has won accolades from across the political establishment and the media.

Fully 11 of the outgoing 22 cabinet members under Tony Blair have been replaced in the reshuffle within the Labour Party government. Political commentators drew a parallel with French President Nicholas Sarkozy, as Brown appointed the first female home secretary and the first Muslim cabinet member, and drafted Liberals and Tories into his government.

Brown was acting decisively to break up the “old politics,” it has been claimed, and fulfill his earlier pledge to use the large area of “common ground” in British politics to create a government regardless of “party labels”. Both Labour and the media hailed the cabinet reshuffle as a determined effort to draw a line under the Blair era. With Brown pledging to examine constitutional reform—including the creation of citizens' juries—Jackie Ashley in the *Guardian* excitedly declared that “the Roundheads have taken over from the Cavaliers” and that “at last the Labour leadership is ‘coming home’ to the party.”

The message of Labour “reconnecting” with the broad mass of working people was reinforced by ex-Cabinet Minister Clare Short, who resigned after the initiation of the Iraq war. Expressing her hope that Brown was a “new beginning,” she hinted that she may be prepared to return to the fold.

Such claims give credence to suggestions that Brown may be preparing a snap general election within one year. But any objective examination of the cabinet line-up and initial policies pledged by Brown makes clear what many believed impossible—that this is a government even more right-wing and directly subservient to big business than that which it replaced.

It is certainly the case that Brown could not continue with the same coterie as before. Not only were many—such as former Home Secretary John Reid—loyal Blair allies who had argued against Brown's succession time and time again. They were also too closely associated with Blair and the Iraq war, which has produced a hemorrhaging of political support for the Labour government.

Jack Straw as foreign secretary had overseen the 2003 Iraq invasion and had been said to want his old job back. Despite his managing Brown's leadership campaign, however, he will instead take the role of Secretary of State for Justice (a post created as a result of the division of the old Home Office) and Lord Chancellor.

The appointment of David Miliband as foreign secretary has been cited as proof that a Brown government will differ significantly from Blair's on foreign policy issues. The BBC reported that it “signals a potential shift in British foreign policy to one in which criticism of the United States and Israel is not off the agenda.”

In fact, Miliband has no such record of opposition to Iraq.

Theyworkforyou.com lists him as “very strongly” in favour of the Iraq war, leaving the *Guardian* to limit itself to the limp statement that he is “not publicly associated with the decision to invade Iraq and is said to have been privately sceptical about it.”

His one substantive difference with Blair was apparently a statement of “dismay” in cabinet that Blair did not call for a cease-fire in Lebanon last year. And as Environment Secretary, he had told a meeting in the US that responding to climate change would require “strong leadership” in Washington.

It is a measure of Britain's dependence on the US that such small change can pass for criticism and even opposition to Washington. Miliband is best known for his central role in the fashioning of New Labour—coming to prominence first as the head of Blair's policy unit in 1997 and rising through the ranks rapidly ever since.

Two outspoken critics on Iraq have been drafted into the government. Former United Nations deputy secretary general Sir Mark Malloch Brown has been made minister for Africa, Asia and the UN, and John Denham, who quit the government over the Iraq invasion, has the new post of universities secretary. Admiral Sir Alan West, the former head of the British navy and a decorated Malvinas war veteran, has been appointed minister for security.

To the extent that these appointments mark a possible change in course, it is one conditioned by the debacle of the US-led invasion of Iraq. Malloch Brown attacked Blair and Bush's disregard for the United Nations and said that the one good to have emerged from the war in Iraq is that it marked the high tide of “America's unilateral approach.”

Multilateralism was now “coming back very strongly,” he claimed, due to the healthy new “recognition of the limits of even the US's power to influence and shape issues in many parts of the world”.

West has described the prospect of a military attack on Iran as “horrendous.” He said, “We should not do it, the matter should be resolved some other way,” and has attacked the government for undermining Britain's armed forces.

But any change in direction will take place within the framework of an aggressive promotion of the interests of British imperialism, in a continued partnership with the US. Brown remains committed to maintaining good relations with the White House, his spokesman said. “He believes very strongly in the importance of the relationship with the United States and the importance of the relationship with the president of the United States.”

That the differences between Blair and Brown are ones of nuance was underscored by the fact that Defence Secretary Des Browne was the only person to retain his cabinet post in the reshuffle. Browne was instrumental in whipping up the media furore over the detention of 15 British personnel in Iranian waters.

The appointment of West as Home Office minister for security brings military figures into the highest echelons of government, without any electoral mandate. In a related development, Brown named former Metropolitan Police Commissioner (Lord) John Stevens as his senior adviser on international security.

Brown has rewarded his most loyal allies. Alastair Darling takes over at the treasury, while Brown's closest advisers, Nick Brown and Douglas Alexander, have been given posts as deputy chief whip and at the Department for International Development, respectively. Another key ally, Ed Balls, is secretary for another new post—the children, schools and families secretary—while his wife Yvette Cooper has been made housing minister. Adding to the familial ties, David Miliband's brother Edward has also been given the post of Cabinet office secretary.

However, Brown's continuity with Blair is exemplified by his appointment of Jacqui Smith as Home Secretary. A loyal Blairite, Smith was also strongly for the Iraq war. In her former capacity as chief whip, however, she was credited with keeping the peace between the Blair and Brown factions of the party.

During Labour's recent deputy leadership contest—there was no challenger to face Brown—Smith warned against any turn to the left by the party and urged a fight for votes in the prosperous areas of the southeast rather than “a retreat to our heartland.... We changed the political landscape by clearly inhabiting the centre-ground,” she argued.

John Hutton, another Blairite, remains in the Department of Industry, while former deputy leadership challenger Hazel Blears takes the post of communities secretary.

Alongside Blears, another four candidates in the deputy leadership race have been given positions in government. Harriet Harman, who won the contest, becomes leader of the House of Commons and Peter Hain business and industry secretary.

Alan Johnson takes over as health secretary. His links with the trade union bureaucracy are no doubt considered valuable as Brown seeks to deepen the privatisation of the National Health Service. One of Brown's last acts as chancellor was to slash the capital budget for England's NHS for 2007-2008 by almost a third—from £6.2 billion to £4.2 billion. He has also promoted leading surgeon Sir Ara Darzi to a health minister. Darzi is a champion of “reconfiguring” the NHS through hospital and ward closures and streamlining operations.

Jon Cruddas, promoted as the “left” candidate in the deputy leadership contest, does not have a post. He was reported to have declined the offer of a junior position, possibly so junior that he was bound to decline it.

In contrast, Shaun Woodward, who defected from the Conservatives to Labour in 1999, has been promoted to Northern Ireland Secretary. Woodward has been credited with securing long-serving Conservative MP Quentin Davies's defection to Labour earlier last week.

At least three Liberal Democrat members have been brought onboard. Lady Shirley Williams, who led the now-defunct Social Democratic Party breakaway from Labour in 1981, turned down a ministerial role but is to act as an adviser on nuclear proliferation. Lady Neuberger, the Liberal Democrat health spokesman, has also agreed to a request to act as an adviser on the promotion of volunteering, and her party colleague, Lord Lester, is to advise on constitutional reform.

Brown's overtures to the Liberal Democrats were made even before officially becoming prime minister, when he offered its former leader Paddy Ashdown the post of Northern Ireland Secretary. Ashdown turned down the position, but the inclusion of Williams, Lester and Neuberger suggests the Liberal Democrats are not as hostile to a de facto coalition with Labour as their public protestations would suggest.

Despite reports that the Ashdown offer was made behind the backs of both parties, it now emerges that Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell was in discussions with Brown over the post and only rejected it after it became public. The *Guardian* reported that it had been informed

by “authoritative sources” that the talks “were more advanced than either man's camp has so far admitted. It emerged that Lord Kirkwood, Sir Menzies's senior aide, and Alistair Darling, the trade secretary and ally of the chancellor, have had several discussions in recent days.”

Just as telling is Brown's inclusion of Sir Digby Jones, the former leader of the Confederation for British Industry, as minister for trade. Digby Jones has ruled out joining the Labour Party, but is set to receive a peerage and will take the Labour whip in the House of Lords. He leads an extensive list of businessmen promoted to government, as part of Brown's new “business council for Britain”.

In a direct rebuff to trade union calls for Brown to take action against private equity firms, the new council is to be headed by the private equity chief, Damon Buffini. The Permira executive, who is already a government adviser on education reform, will lead a team of high-profile business leaders, including Sir Terry Leahy, head of the supermarket chain Tesco, Virgin's Sir Richard Branson and Amstrad's Sir Alan Sugar.

According to the *Financial Times*, the council is designed to “help inject private sector expertise into areas such as skills and business support reforms. Mr. Brown also wants to use the body to depoliticise further aspects of state spending on industry, such as the relative funding for different sectors.”

The newspaper reported that Brown's accession to leadership “has spurred a rush of donations to Labour coffers with four businessmen, including leading private equity figures, contributing more than half a million pounds to the party in recent weeks.”

The four leading businessmen donating up to £250,000 each in recent weeks are Sir Ronald Cohen, “the doyen of British private equity,” venture capitalist Nigel Doughty, former Goldman Sachs partner Jon Aisbitt, and Peter Coates, the internet gambling tycoon.

The *Financial Times* wrote of a “sense of rapprochement” between Labour and big business after “strained relations in Labour's third term.”

“British business is sorely in need of some regulatory reform,” it wrote, urging Hutton to “scour Whitehall, looking for problems caused by rules, taxes and government initiatives.” In an indication of what is to come, he continued that “the UK's flexible labour market has served it well over the last decade, but it is not so flexible as once it was. That should be Mr. Hutton's top priority.”



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