

Britain: Labour refuses to answer Davis's by-election challenge

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Labour will not contest the by-election forced by the resignation of shadow home secretary David Davis, which he says is intended to initiate a public debate on the government's attack on democratic rights.

The decision confirms that the Labour government is incapable of defending its extension of the period in which people can be detained without charge to 42 days—a measure that it managed to push through Parliament only with the support of nine members of the Democratic Unionist Party, reportedly “persuaded” with financial incentives for Northern Ireland.

More fundamentally, it underscores Labour's hostility to any form of democratic accountability—a position which it made a point of principle with its decision to support the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq in defiance of popular opinion.

Initially, Davis's announcement was greeted with universal scorn and derision by the media, who claimed that his “egotistical stunt” would backfire due to broad public support for the government's stance.

While Labour joined such claims, it refused to say if it would contest the election from the very start. Instead, having been defeated in the London Mayoral contest by Conservative Boris Johnson and with record lows in opinion polls, it turned to its closest backer, Rupert Murdoch, for help.

Within hours of Davis's resignation, Kelvin MacKenzie, the former editor of the *Sun*, boasted that he had the oligarch's blessing to take on Davis and that “the *Sun* has always been up for 42 days, or perhaps even 420 days, frankly.”

MacKenzie, who said he had discussed his candidacy with Murdoch and *Sun* editor Rebekah Wade earlier that evening, said he was “90 percent certain” to challenge Davis if Labour decided not to. He also revealed that Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Tony Blair had been present at the party, implying that he had Labour's backing to act as its proxy.

But as thousands of e-mails and texts to newspapers and media outlets showed that Davis's stance had struck a chord with the public, little was heard from MacKenzie or the *Sun*

for several days.

The former editor's claim that Murdoch would finance his candidacy—which would be illegal under electoral law—combined with the possibility that the *Sun*'s claim to represent the “man in the street” would founder should it be seen to tie itself too closely to an unpopular government—appears to have done for MacKenzie's candidacy.

Not that Murdoch was out of the picture. The *Guardian* reported that the *Sun* had also “considered approaching Rachel North, a survivor of the 7/7 bombings, who has campaigned for justice for the victims.” And his other media outlet, Sky News, reported that Labour was canvassing John Smeaton to stand in its place. The baggage handler won the Queen's Gallantry Medal for helping police foil a terrorist attack at Glasgow Airport last year. The report was considered especially authoritative because it came from Sky TV's political editor Adam Boulton, husband of Anji Hunter, Blair's former spin-doctor and close friend.

North, however, told the *Guardian* that she “admired Davis's stand” and was “a big fan of civil liberties and freedom and democracy.” At the weekend, Smeaton also scotched claims that he had any intention of standing, stating that he did not understand where the rumours were coming from.

Finally, on Thursday, MacKenzie confirmed he would not be a candidate in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election, citing financial considerations.

“The clincher for me was the money. Clearly the *Sun* couldn't put up the cash—so I was going to have to rustle up a maximum of £100,000 to conduct my campaign,” he said, rewriting events to suggest that the earlier declaration of his candidacy had been entirely a personal whim. Instead, he urged *Sun* readers to support Northampton market trader Eamonn Fitzpatrick, who has said he will run as an independent in favour of 42-days detention.

Currently, the unknown fruit and vegetable salesman is one of several independent candidates who, in addition to their campaign over one or another single issue, are

defending the government's detention powers.

Labour has attempted to justify its abstention on the grounds that the by-election is a "farce." Labour deputy leader Harriet Harman accused Davis of "wasting over £80,000 to run a by-election, paid for by the council taxpayers," while Culture Secretary Andy Burnham has said Davis should be made to personally foot the bill.

Such demands establish an entirely new criterion for elections—i.e., whether the government of the day considers them politically pertinent or financially worthwhile. Labour has already overturned its manifesto commitment to hold a referendum on the European Union's Lisbon Treaty—rejected by Irish voters last weekend—on the grounds that it no longer considers it necessary.

In truth, Labour cannot publicly defend its policies because it is the political plaything of big business and the super-rich, whose interests are antithetical to those of the broad mass of the population.

That is why Brown chose to make his rebuttal to Davis before an invite-only audience of just 50 people from the pro-Labour think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research.

The thrust of his speech on June 17 was that "modern security" requirements, "modern challenges" and "new threats" could not be managed "by the old, tried methods and approaches."

Terrorism, organised crime and drug trafficking were all organised globally, using the latest technology, he said.

Whereas in the "old world" police took "fingerprints, now we have the technology of DNA."

"While the old world relied on the eyes of a policeman out on patrol, today we also have the back-up of CCTV.

"While the old world used only photographs to identify people, now we have biometrics."

In other words, technological progress justifies the state's acquisition of massive new powers—including plans for a national DNA database, identity cards and widespread surveillance (as in the case of closed-circuit cameras)—an argument that evokes Orwell's *1984*.

As for Brown's claims that technological developments could be used to "strengthen the protection of the individual," there was no evidence of this in his speech, which was all about strengthening the state. His pledge that liberty meant "never subjecting the citizen to arbitrary treatment" and "always respecting basic rights and freedoms" was made ridiculous by the government's passage of 42-days, and its earlier plans to introduce 90-days detention.

It is a measure of the putrefaction of Labour and the so-called "left" in general that a right-wing Tory can present himself as the champion of civil liberties.

Labour's 42-days detention is only the latest and most

draconian of the more than 200 pieces of "anti-terror" legislation enacted by Labour since 2001 that have overturned fundamental civil liberties and have established the legislative framework for a police state.

Throughout this time, the Conservative Party has supported the "war on terror." Davis himself voted in favour of 28-days detention without charge and the Iraq war. But he can attack Labour as "gutless" because not a single Labour "left" was prepared to break ranks and challenge the government. The two Labour "rebels" over 42-days who have said they will back Davis—Bob Marshall-Andrews and Ian Gibson—only did so when it became clear the government would not contest the election.

Even more strikingly, all the government's critics have thus far preferred to sign up to Davis's campaign, rather than launch their own. Veteran Labourite Tony Benn has said he supports Davis, as has *Observer* columnist Henry Porter and Shami Chakrabarti, the director of the human rights organisation Liberty.

This has raised alarm at the pro-Labour *New Statesman* magazine, which, like all official political circles in Britain, was caught off-guard by the extent of the political disaffection that would be revealed by Davis's resignation.

On June 12, *New Statesman* editor Martin Bright had hailed Davis's "courageous" resignation. In his blog, "I salute David Davis," he wrote that the shadow home secretary had done "the decent thing" and wished "Davis well" in the election.

Within a week, his position had changed. The government's abstention and the willingness of its "liberal" critics to rally to a Tory candidate left Bright concerned that Labour's left periphery was fatally compromised politically.

In an air of desperation, Bright wrote, asking, "Where is the David Davis of the left, prepared to resign and challenge the government's authoritarian agenda... Where is the politician or public figure to challenge the government's authoritarian agenda from a progressive perspective? In short, where is the liberal candidate to stand in Haltemprice and Howden?"

Issuing the call for a "genuinely liberal candidate to stand against David Davis," he pledged that such a candidate "would receive the full backing of the *New Statesman*."



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