

British Prime Minister Brown faces possible leadership challenge

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The Labour government is wracked by internecine conflict, with widespread speculation on the future of Prime Minister Gordon Brown. The infighting is motivated primarily by fear of meltdown in next year's General Election that will not only possibly see Labour in opposition, but cost hundreds of MPs their seats, salaries, perks and connections with Britain's boardrooms.

Brown is facing opposition from that faction of the party associated with former Prime Minister Tony Blair and some of his own former allies. His first major problem emerged over the forced resignation last month of one of his closest advisers, Damien McBride, after the leaking of e-mails he sent to pro-Labour blogger Derek Draper, discussing an internet smear campaign against the Conservatives. The affair precipitated the resignation of Labour MP Alice Mahon, who is now standing for the nationalist, anti-European No2EU slate formed by Rail Maritime and Transport union leader Bob Crow.

A long-running embarrassment for Brown is the series of revelations of MPs money-grubbing on their official expenses regarding purported second homes, travel allowances and other claims that forced the prime minister to pledge reforms. When he attempted to do so, however, he met a furious response.

Brown announced his proposed measures in a *YouTube* broadcast that was ridiculed as messianic and accompanied by bizarre facial contortions. But the real target of the attack was opposition to any attempt to withhold the gravy-boat from MPs by an overhaul of second home allowances and paying MPs only when they attend parliament. Fearing a defeat in a vote, Brown ditched his plans for a per-day allowance and backed off from a parliamentary vote on reform of the £24,000-a-year second home allowance. This will instead be left to an independent inquiry, conducted by Sir Christopher Kelly, chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. MPs demanded that issues such as declaring outside earnings should be similarly shunted.

The fiasco on expenses followed the defeat over an attempt to set defined limits on the rights of Gurkhas who have served in the British Army to reside in the UK. Gurkhas, from Nepal and parts of India, have become symbols of the faded might of the British Empire and its military traditions. As such they found

themselves championed by political forces not normally associated with a warm embrace of immigrants.

The Liberal Democrats moved a motion on April 29 offering all Gurkhas equal right of residence. Under Labour's existing proposals, 36,000 former Gurkhas have been denied UK residency because they served in the British army before 1997. Labour offered concessions allowing more ex-soldiers to settle, but was defeated by 267 votes to 246 with the Tories backing the Liberal Democrats. The motion was backed by 27 Labour MPs, while others abstained.

Brown's travails occasioned a spate of open criticism of his leadership by prominent Labourites, including ex-Home Secretaries David Blunkett and Charles Clarke. Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Hazel Blears complained of the government's "lamentable failure" to engage with voters and warned of "dire consequences", before being forced to issue a statement declaring "100 percent support" for Brown.

Deputy Labour Leader's Harriet Harman was also forced to reject reports that she would challenge for party leadership if Brown stood down. Even so there remains speculation of a possible team-up between Harman and Jon Cruddas, as well as the possibility of former home secretary and foreign secretary Jack Straw and Alan Johnson standing.

A leadership challenge could be precipitated by a disastrous performance in the June 4 elections to the English county councils and the European parliament. Writing in the *Telegraph*, Mary Riddell quoted a senior minister stating, "We are tearing ourselves to shreds, and it makes me weep."

But this is a struggle dominated by and waged exclusively on the right. Its aim is to mount a desperate last-ditch effort to restore the support of big business circles for Labour.

The Conservatives under David Cameron have won support from Labour from the right by pledging to impose cuts on a scale that will inaugurate an "age of austerity" and denouncing Brown for his failure to do so. This is just what the most powerful sections of the bourgeoisie want to hear. Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times*, once a stalwart of Blair and New Labour, declared on May 3, "It is time to invoke the spirit of Maggie."

"Thirty years ago Margaret Thatcher was elected prime

minister and began making the changes necessary to lift Britain off its knees,” it stated. “Now we are at a crossroads. A rudderless Labour government seems to be drifting towards electoral defeat, although we may have to wait a year for that. The economy is in a deep hole...”

The *Sunday Times* declared that the British people must be made to once again “warm to entrepreneurial success”, because of a “reaction against greedy bankers” that is “disturbing”.

It went on to denounce Chancellor Alistair Darling’s “retrograde budget, pushing the top rate of tax to 50p in the pound”, complaining, “We are drifting back to the old attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s when the public preferred overall mediocrity rather than letting a minority get rich and increase the nation’s wealth. When we finally have the election, Gordon Brown’s legacy will be a bloated and inefficient state built up over 13 years of misguided thinking that showering government departments with taxpayers’ cash would pay dividends.”

For the Blairites too, Brown has not gone far enough even after handing over billions to the banks. They are determined that the Tories do not succeed in replacing them in the affections of Murdoch et al. Indeed the *Sunday Times* published and cites approvingly the plan of action proposed by David Halpern, former policy adviser to Blair and now director of research at the Institute for Government: “He describes how the Canadian government in the mid-1990s, faced with a huge budget deficit and loss of international confidence, embarked on a drastic programme of spending cuts, slashing a fifth off government outlays in three years. It is equivalent to lopping £130 billion off the size of the UK state now.”

This is the primary agenda motivating the trench warfare in Labour’s ranks. Following the April budget, Stephen Byers MP, a former cabinet member and close ally of Blair, denounced the proposed 50 percent top tax rate on those earning more than £150,000 as a “cynical” move that “will make the UK less attractive.”

In the May 5 edition of the *Times*, Rachel Sylvester quotes a former Cabinet minister complaining, “All the public is hearing from Labour is a left-wing message that is electorally disastrous.”

She writes of “a growing frustration among the modernisers about Downing Street’s failure to drive through public service reform” and identifies the possibility of a retreat from the planned part-privatisation of the Royal Mail “because of opposition from leftwingers” as a key issue. The measure is to be voted on today and there are predictions that somewhere between 100 to 125 Labour MPs will vote against the government.

However, whereas the Blairites are on a war footing what passes for the party’s “left” wants nothing more than a compromise with Brown based on passing an amended Bill.

The alternative proposed to the plan to sell off 49 percent of Royal Mail comes from the Compass group. Compass is urging

that Royal Mail is transformed into a “not-for-profit dividend company” similar to Network Rail and the BBC Trust, that will raise money from the capital markets that “does not count as government borrowing”. Its leader Neil Lawson describes this as “modernisation by consent”, which gives the government “everything they want and which would go though with the enthusiastic backing of Labour MPs.”

The fact that this represents no challenge to New Labour’s pro-business agenda is indicated by Stephen Byers giving cautious approval to the Compass proposal.

The conflicts now erupting within the Labour Party only serve to confirm how completely it functions as a political tool of the financial oligarchy. Under conditions of an historic crisis of British and world capitalism, with millions of working people facing increasing hardship, mass unemployment and escalating home repossessions, the highest echelons of Labour are almost exclusively concerned with winning back the support of Britain’s corporate heads and the super-rich. There is not the barest suggestion of a left-wing opposition developing within its ranks that in any way sets out to defend the interests of working people.

The union leaders have, in the main, rallied behind Brown, the man they put in power after Blair stood down, and attempted to attribute some left credentials to his government. Derek Simpson, general secretary of Unite, Britain’s biggest union, went so far as to describe Darling’s last budget as having “positioned Labour as the party for jobs and social justice while exposing the Tories for being the party of cuts and inequality.”

Should the unions at some point be forced to move against Brown, it will only be to support someone less discredited but of the same ilk in the vain hope of restoring Labour’s electoral fortunes.



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