

Britain: Another failed Labour leadership challenge against Brown

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The Labour Party has put on a show of unity following the collapse of yet another attempt to challenge Prime Minister Gordon Brown's leadership.

The failed coup was initiated by former defence secretary Geoff Hoon and former health secretary Patricia Hewitt last Wednesday. In a letter to Labour Members of Parliament the pair complained that, in the run up to a General Election, the party was "deeply divided over the question of leadership". Many Labour colleagues "have expressed their frustration at the way in which this question is affecting our political performance", the letter continued. "We have therefore come to the conclusion that the only way to resolve this issue would be to allow every member to express their view in a secret ballot.

"This could be done quickly and with minimum disruption to the work of MPs and the Government. Whatever the outcome the whole of the party could then go forward, knowing that this matter had been sorted out once and for all."

Hoon and Hewitt's pose of a desire to restore party unity was undermined by reports that the letter was instigated by former home secretary, Charles Clarke, who was also behind the leadership challenge to Brown in June. That attempt failed after Brown made clear that any potential successor would almost certainly have to bring forward the General Election to legitimise their position. While Labour is tipped to lose an election under Brown, many MPs fear that it is likely to go down to defeat whoever is in charge. Such concerns were enough to prevent any viable challenger moving against Brown last year.

According to the *Guardian*, Hoon and Hewitt had been unable to come up with an alternative candidate. They had therefore determined that the only possibility for removing Brown was "to engineer a situation where [he] was left with no option but to go, through a massive backbench vote of no confidence. Then the party could

agree on a compromise candidate".

Instead, Hoon and Hewitt's plan backfired as the anticipated revolt failed to materialise. Just as seven months earlier, no one was prepared to take up a position regarded as a poisoned chalice.

Brown dismissed the letter as a moment of "silliness". But the breakdown of the coup attempt has not strengthened his leadership. Endorsements from those considered likely heirs were less than ringing. Foreign Secretary David Miliband stated only "I am working closely with the prime minister on foreign policy issues and support the re-election campaign for a Labour government that he is leading."

An editorial in the *Guardian*, January 8, complained, "If the 1789 revolution had been organised by plotters from the Labour party, King Louis would still be sitting on the throne of France. And if they had been active in Moscow in 1917, the Tsar would surely remain in firm control of the Russian nation. This week's events might not have strengthened Gordon Brown, but they diminished almost everyone else. Lots of present and former cabinet ministers have been revealed to be incompetent or indecisive or deceitful and in some cases all three, including some people who soon hope to replace Mr Brown. It was an awful mess from an exhausted party whose internal contradictions are accelerating its slide towards catastrophe."

To the extent that there is any agreement within the party, it is that Brown is the best man to lead it into defeat. Such is Labour's state of decomposition that it appears likely that a leadership challenge was scorned because the party does not want to win the general election. Writing in the *Independent*, Bruce Anderson opined that "all of Brown's Cabinet now want him to lose the next election".

If the Labour cabinet could decide the outcome of the election in a secret ballot, "there would be an

overwhelming vote for a [Conservative leader David] Cameron-led minority government, which they would hope to overthrow after they had sorted themselves out”, Anderson wrote. “Most of Mr Brown's own colleagues find him so impossible to work for that they cannot bear the thought of another Brown premiership.”

It isn't only that a period in opposition would enable the rival factions within Labour's ruling echelons to finally settle old scores. More fundamentally, Brown's timorous effort to improve his poll ratings by attempting to reconnect with Labour's traditional working class base is opposed by much of his own cabinet.

The Conservatives have demanded massive cuts in public spending in order to plug the £178 billion government deficit caused largely by Brown's multi-billion pound bailout of Britain's banks. Raising the spectre of state bankruptcy, the Tories have pledged themselves to a programme of austerity measures as the only “sensible” means of reassuring the international money markets of Britain's continued creditworthiness.

Brown has attacked such measures, saying that they will damage the UK's chances of economic recovery. Most alarmingly for some in his own party, and amongst sections of the establishment more broadly, he has linked Tory pledges for spending cuts to their defence of class privilege.

The prime minister described Conservative plans to raise the threshold for inheritance tax as being “dreamed up on the playing fields of Eton,” the private boys school attended by Cameron that is the preserve of the richest and most privileged in Britain. In a New Year's message Brown attacked those “who say we must plan for a decade of austerity and unfairness, where the majority lose out while the privileged few protect themselves.”

Such statements were denounced by the Conservatives and others as an unforgivable attempt to stir up “class war”. Pro-Labour newspapers attacked the prime minister's quip out of fear that it would offend the financial oligarchy on whose behalf it has governed for over a decade. Moreover, by raising the issue of class, Brown had drawn attention to the very issue that Labour claimed to have banished to the history books for good, and under conditions in which recession is exacerbating already marked social inequalities.

There were indications that Brown's flirtation with demagoguery was proving popular, which made it even more dangerous. Opinion polls recorded a slight recovery in Labour's ratings in the wake of Brown's attacks on the Tories and show that the majority of voters do identify

Cameron with upholding the interests of the super-rich elite.

Yet it is Labour that has upheld the selfish interests of this extraordinarily wealthy layer during its period in office. Notwithstanding the prime minister's electioneering, his government is also committed to deep cuts in public spending, including wage freezes. Even should it win the election, it will be faced with carrying through an offensive against the living standards of working people no less severe than that proposed by the Tories.

Labour is a right-wing bourgeois party that does not want to make pledges to defend the interests of working people, even if it means more votes. It especially does not want to take power on policies that are associated in any way with plans to “soak the rich”, lest it be called on to carry out such measures. That is why the main result of the failed leadership challenge has been to strengthen the position of those demanding Brown spell out truthfully the scale of the cuts Labour plans to implement.

At the head of the pack is Peter Mandelson, the unelected Business Secretary, who has assumed a semi-bonapartist role within the party. Mandelson is considered the primary architect of the “New Labour” project and its disavowal of social reforms. As the man who famously boasted that Labour was “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich”, he was reported to have “wined” at Brown's jibe against Cameron and to have expressed concern that the party might “tack left” in order to win office.

In a speech to the Work Foundation made the same day as the Hoon/Hewitt bid, Mandelson warned that “Reality demands that the centre-left cannot and must not confine itself to the politics of [wealth] distribution.”

He told the *London Evening Standard* that Labour was “not a heartlands party”. Asked about a policy of targeting Labour's traditional working class constituencies, he stated forthrightly, “We are not going to win the election on that basis.”



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