

Britain's Labour Party: No honour amongst thieves

Julie Hyland

19 September 2006

Only last week Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown staged a show of unity in an attempt to halt the internecine warfare within the party over the timing of Blair's departure from office.

Brown, who had come under fire from the media and sections of the Labour Party for orchestrating the campaign to force Blair into publicly setting a date, praised the prime minister and declared that the issue of timing was a personal matter for Blair.

Of more importance to the financial oligarchy that determine Labour government policy, Brown assured them that the prime ministers right-wing "legacy" would be safe in his hands. He rebuked anti-Blair protestors at the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress and pledged himself to continue the privatisation of public services.

But within days, Geoff Hoon, the minister for Europe, broke the truce by calling for Blair to quit before next May's local authority elections.

The central issue was for Blair "to finish at a time that is in the interests of the party and the country," Hoon said. Backing Brown for Labour leader, he explained, "I think Gordon should be the next leader so we should think very carefully about who we want to be in place when we face our next poll test."

In an attempt to sweeten the pill, Hoon said his call for Blair to stand down early in the New Year was aimed at ensuring the prime minister would "go out on a high." He added, "He should do it while he's still popular." This statement was belied by his subsequent admission that the party could be "wiped out" in May's elections for the Scottish parliament, Welsh Assembly and English local authorities if Blair remained leader.

"It is a concern that if we were to lose badly in the local elections again, two years running, a lot of active Labour members would not be active by the time of the next general election," he said, recalling that the Conservatives had yet to recover from Margaret Thatcher's premiership.

Hoon is typical of the forces within Labour now moving against Blair. A long-time Blair loyalist, he was fully committed to the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as Britain's defence secretary between 1999 until 2005. Along with the prime minister, he was responsible for the campaign of lies and disinformation spread about Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction" to justify pre-emptive war.

His role in the "outing" of leading weapons inspector and whistleblower Doctor David Kelly cemented his reputation as a

fundamentally dishonest character—as did his denials that he had any knowledge of the abuse of Iraqi civilians by US and British soldiers, despite having received a confidential report to that effect months before by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Hoon notoriously remarked that he had not read the report because it was only an "interim" document.

Hoon's latest remarks are self-serving. Having been demoted by Blair last year, he no doubt hopes a Brown takeover will help safeguard his parliamentary seat and possibly offer him a new place within the cabinet.

He is not alone. Reports indicate that a number of motions have been tabled for the Labour Party conference later this month calling for the National Executive Committee to organise a leadership contest early next year.

There is not a trace of genuine oppositional sentiment in such demands. Having acquiesced in the illegal invasion of Iraq and enthusiastically championed all of Blair's pro-big business policies, the Labour Party has alienated much of its erstwhile popular base among working people. Its major concern is to find some way of repackaging the government's right-wing policies.

Blair has the measure of his critics. On Monday, in a move intended to signal that he had no intention of standing aside any time soon, he set out plans for a "refreshed" policy-making scheme that is to help shape Labour's agenda for the next ten years.

At the same time, the prime minister has refused to publicly endorse the chancellor as his successor, amidst reports that his supporters are seeking out a "stop Brown" candidate. The *Times of London* reported that Blair had indicated he would like to see the leadership "skip a generation." Work and Pension Secretary John Hutton's refusal to back Brown as leader was seen as further evidence Blair's backers are preparing a counter-bid.

Hutton himself is reportedly one of those on a short list of potential challengers. Another supporter of the Iraq war and privatisation, he has recently piloted measures to slash incapacity benefits. The *Telegraph* reported that "Mr. Hutton is widely believed to have been the unnamed Cabinet minister who told a BBC correspondent that Mr. Brown would make a 'f***ing awful prime minister' and that he would do 'all he f***ing could' to stop him."

Other names said to be on the list include Home Secretary John Reid, Environment Secretary David Miliband and Education Secretary Alan Johnson.

Miliband, formerly head of the prime minister's policy-making unit, is said to be Blair's favoured alternative. He had earlier ruled himself out of standing, endorsing Brown as a "very good leader." However, Labour sources have briefed that this is a manoeuvre aimed at pre-empting speculation about his own intentions whilst leaving the field clear for him to enter the contest if Brown goes down.

There are reports that several web sites backing a leadership bid by Johnson have been registered. Another supporter of the Iraq war, ID cards, and privatisation, Johnson is said to have been assured the support of Blair's "backroom machinery" should he declare his candidacy.

Johnson gave a series of interviews over the weekend in which he laid down his political marker, highlighting his "rags to riches" personal story whilst making clear his life-long hostility to Trotskyism. As a trade union activist under the Tories, he boasted to the *Observer*, he'd told the "Trots" to "piss off."

Another challenger is Alan Milburn. Former Home Secretary Charles Clarke tipped the former health secretary against Brown. Milburn's policy speech last week was widely regarded as the precursor to a leadership bid.

In what was described as a "radical post-Blair manifesto," Milburn called for state subsidies to enable parents to move their children out of public education, the extension of "asset ownership," tax breaks and additional measures to force single parents into work.

Johnson has indicated that he might decide to run for the post of deputy Labour leader, as the incumbent John Prescott is expected to stand down with Blair.

Peter Hain, secretary of state for Northern Ireland and Wales, has declared his candidacy for the deputy leadership contest, as has Harriet Harman, a constitutional affairs minister, and Hilary Benn, international development secretary. Dagenham member of Parliament (MP) and former Blair adviser Jon Cruddas is also reportedly taking soundings.

At the weekend, Jack Straw, formerly home secretary and foreign secretary and now leader of the House of Commons, set out his stall for a deputy leadership contest. Whilst claiming that he had not yet decided whether to officially stand, Straw outlined his credentials for the job.

"I've spent nine years doing two of the three senior jobs in government," he said. "I have a reputation for vigour and intellectual rigour, for gaining people's confidence when the country as well as the government is in difficult situations."

Most of the contenders are positioning themselves as unity candidates who will be able to bridge the factional divide within the party under a Brown leadership. But there are many signs that this will prove impossible.

Last week, Labour MP Clare Short announced she would not contest the next election as a Labour candidate after 26 years. Indicating that she could run as an independent instead, Short called for a hung parliament. She now faces expulsion from the party.

Short resigned from the cabinet in the aftermath of the Iraq war and remains one of only a handful within Labour's echelons attacking Blair over the invasion. In her recent statement she

decried Blair's "craven support for the extremism of US neoconservative foreign policy" and for having "dishonoured the UK, undermined the UN and international law and helped to make the world a more dangerous place." She also stated that she did not believe Brown would prove any different.

But Short combined her denunciation of US and British policies in the Middle East with a defence of Labour's domestic agenda. "There are many good things that New Labour has done since 1997," she said, claiming that these were "mostly things Labour committed itself to before the New Labour coup."

Short's effort to separate Labour's foreign policy from its implementation of big business diktat at home does not hold water. Neither does her attempt to put political distance between herself and Blair and Brown.

Short was part of the "New Labour coup." As she herself noted, she had worked closely with former Labour leaders Neil Kinnock and John Smith "to ready the party for power." Crucial to this preparation was junking any connection between Labour and its previous agenda of social reforms.

The *Independent* pointed out that should Short be expelled, she will be only the fourth Labour MP in 15 years, and that she herself played a key role in the expulsion of two of these—Dave Nellist and Terry Fields, who were thrown out of the party in 1991 as part of a witch-hunt against the Militant tendency.

Nonetheless, that Short should effectively call for the electoral defeat of her own party is a measure of the bitter tensions now wracking Labour.

For years it was claimed that one of Blair's greatest achievement had been to put an end to the divisions that had plagued Labour during the 1980s. By expelling the left and removing policy-making from any form of democratic control, he had ensured both ideological and organisational homogeneity, it was said.

But in destroying any popular social base for its rule, Labour was left devoid of any unifying principle other than personal advancement—an attribute that made it an ideal vehicle for doing the bidding of the rich and powerful. Now that it has all gone so badly wrong and the party faces losing office, there is nothing to hold it together.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact