

All-Out Political War Is On in Britain

by Mary Burdman

Britain in the second week of November was in the throes of unprecedented political warfare. All parts of the establishment—the political class, royalty, the legal establishment, security services, and the financial sector—were in turmoil. The international strategy of Prime Minister Tony Blair—who took Britain, as the leading ally of the United States, into the Iraq debacle over enormous public opposition—was coming apart by the day. The British economy is in a perilous condition, with the Bank of England itself issuing regular warnings about dangers posed by its record-level £900 billion of debt.

This being Britain, the political and economic fissures emerge in public fights which are as convoluted as they are brutal. Since October, the rate at which one controversy or scandal has overwhelmed the one before it, has become breathtaking. Tony Blair had had the effrontery to proclaim himself “the only game in town,” in a self-justifying interview with *The Times* published on Oct. 13, when the opposition Tory Party fell into bloody in-fighting. This was during a—very temporary—lull in the highly damaging revelations being made by the inquiry conducted by Lord Hutton into the apparent suicide of Britain’s prominent arms inspector, Dr. David Kelly, on July 17.

Blair should have known better. While the Tories’ troubles and other scandals might have appeared to be a diversion from Blair’s troubles, you must remember, as one London insider told *EIR*, that “this is the land of Shakespeare, and the powers-that-be know that such diversions will not really save Blair. If Blair’s sins were on the front page every day, people would get bored with them.” Soon enough, “attention will go back to Blair’s troubles, with even greater effect.” And indeed, the lull was short-lived; public protests about the Iraq war, which had been muted so as not to undermine the troops in the field, were again raised from the highest levels of the British establishment. On Oct. 14, Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, told Britain’s Royal Institute for International Affairs that the attack on Iraq “cannot be justified as just war.” The same day in London, Lord Alexander of Weedon attacked Britain’s Attorney General, Lord Goldstein, for giving legal sanction to the war, and told the Law Society that Lord Goldsmith should publish his “judgment,” a break with British legal tradition.

This being Britain, the national policy fights emphatically include the monarchy. The revelation by Paul Burrell, former butler to the late Princess Diana, that she had written him a letter before her death warning that she feared she could be killed in a staged automobile accident, caused a furor which had scarcely abated when other nasty rumors against Prince Charles, dating back to the mid-1990s, hit the press—“establishment” as well as tabloid. That attack culminated in a barrage of screaming headlines on Sunday, Nov. 9, of the sort not seen since the astonishing national reaction to the death of Princess Diana in 2001.

The reports’ reliability is of little matter; the issue is whether Prince Charles, and possibly the monarchy itself, will survive the onslaught. The situation harkens all the way back to the 1936 Abdication Crisis, which also occurred amid great economic and political upheaval and danger. Feeble efforts to protect Prince Charles by court restraints on publication, crumbled within days. In 1936, reports on King Edward VIII’s lover, Mrs. Simpson, were banned from the British press to little avail.

It is far from clear just who is doing what to whom. There are reliable indications that Burrell himself is loyal to the Queen and Prince Philip, although not to the Prince of Wales; meanwhile, one of Charles’ highest-level former aides, Mark Bolland, has made some of the most damaging public revelations about the Prince. And the “liberal” press, including *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, have demonstrated internal rifts and extremely conflicting loyalties to Tony Blair’s “New Labour” and his Iraq war. These establishment newspapers are involved in nasty political infighting, while the tabloids are having a field day. The real issues are the international political and financial crisis, being fought over in classic British style.

‘Cynicism About Iraq Is Tangible’

The Hutton Inquiry is now formally adjourned for Lord Hutton to write his final report. It had been presumed, as a London insider told *EIR*, that the report would be finished in November, and Blair had staked a lot on that. He had wanted to use the Queen’s Speech—the British Prime Minister’s equivalent to the U.S. State of the Union, which is written by the government, not the Queen—at the opening of Parliament Nov. 25, to re-launch “New Labour.” Blair had chosen that date assuming the Hutton report would be public, and he could counter it. But the report will not be ready until the end of the year, and is hanging over Blair’s head.

The prolonged Hutton inquiry only fed into the growing public malaise with the ever-worsening war in Iraq. The depth and width of the entire population’s cynicism about the Iraq war is “really tangible,” and is a matter of open public discussion, a Scottish source said. There is “extreme cynicism about the rationale” used to get into the war—which is the real issue of the Hutton inquiry.

Blair and his Chancellor and chief Labour Party rival,

Gordon Brown, fell out in a much-publicized rift beginning Nov. 6, when Brown went on national television with his political grievances. The cited “issues” were trivial, but underlying them is the future of the whole “New Labour” project and government. Brown’s real objection is to Blair’s adherence to Peter Mandelson, who was Blair’s closest political advisor before scandals about Mandelson’s goings-on in Rio de Janeiro forced his resignation. Blair, however, simply cannot afford to kick Brown out of the Treasury. As one political observer warned: “it would spook the markets.” Brown has been responsible for maintaining the “stability” of the British economy since new Labour came to power in May 1997. That “stability,” in reality, is a mountain of debt.

On Nov. 6, the Bank of England raised interest rates for the first time since 2000, up from 48-year lows. On Nov. 13, Bank Governor Mervyn King warned British consumers that “rates may change,” implying a series of rate rises. King had warned in a speech in October, that the unprecedented level of consumer borrowing had increased the risk of a “sharp correction.” Overall debt in Britain is at levels never seen before. On top of the mortgage bubble, probably the worst in the world, credit card lending has doubled in the last four years, and, despite the rock-bottom interest rates, over 6 million households are having trouble managing their debt.

As one observer noted, “This is not the time to be axing your Chancellor.”

The Labour infighting faces an—at least for now—united Tory Party under its newly-elected leader, former Home Secretary Michael Howard. Howard is known to have a fairly realistic sense that something must be done to stop the decay of the British economy. His hapless predecessor, Iain Duncan Smith, was notoriously close to the U.S. neo-conservatives led by Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Who Invited Bush Here?

Into this turmoil will walk the extremely unpopular American President George W. Bush, on a state visit to Britain from Nov. 18-21. Large demonstrations are being organized to protest the Iraq war, by the “Stop the War Coalition” and the Muslim Association of Britain—the same organizations which organized the 2 million-strong peaceful demonstrations in London in February. The White House is demanding unprecedented security for Bush, including, reportedly, that the main streets of central London be closed off for the entire visit and a wide “exclusion zone” be maintained between the President and everyone else. This is impossible: London Mayor Ken Livingstone, who marched in February, stated that “the ideas of some American security advisers, that perhaps we should shut down the whole of central London for three days, ignoring the economic consequences of that; I don’t think that’s got a chance at all.”

Such blatant interference in London is hardly increasing

the President’s welcome. The visit, planned many months ago as likely to enhance Bush’s electoral chances, has been made into the first “state” visit by a U.S. President since Woodrow Wilson in 1918. This means that Bush’s official hostess will be the Queen; but, with all the travails hitting the House of Windsor, it is not likely she will welcome the repercussions of three days hosting the most unpopular U.S. President in decades.

Bush has reportedly refused to speak in the City of London, *The Times* noted on Nov. 12, to avoid any taint from association with financiers. “His minders in the States said they were looking for pictures beamed back of him with ordinary people rather than toffs and financiers in an election year,” *The Times* quoted one City insider. “After Enron, WorldCom and other such disasters, Bush does not want to be seen in their company.” But will “ordinary people” want to be seen with Bush? In the huge February demonstrations around Britain, the “ordinary people”—of all ages, backgrounds, and appearances—were out on the streets protesting the impending war, and they could well be there again next week.

Blair, more and more on the defensive, used the London Lord Mayor’s Banquet on Nov. 10 to try to justify his disastrous war, and his determination to save the “special relationship” with the “neo-con” crew dominating the Bush Administration. Blair re-asserted his “New Labour” foreign policy, that Britain should be the “bridge” between the United States and Europe. But this meant that Blair had to re-assert his support for the Iraq war, and his role as the “poodle” of the U.S. chickenhawks, as opposition to these policies rises by the day in Britain. Blair had to admit: “At present there is a fairly narrow constituency for this view.” As to Bush’s visit, Blair acknowledged: “There will be demonstrations. His friends wonder at the timing. His enemies rub their hands at what they see as the potential embarrassment.” On Iraq, Blair had again to admit that there “can be entirely legitimate disagreement” on the “rights and wrongs of that conflict. . . . It will test the validity of the view of those whose protest goes far wider than merely condemnation of the war in Iraq and extends to the whole of American and U.K. foreign policy.” That, at least, is certainly true enough.

To objections that “the coalition is an army of occupation,” stealing Iraqi oil, and unleashing terrorism, Blair could only counter that Iraq is “moving toward full democracy.” He ended by attacking “anti-Americanism,” but his “pro-Americanism” is only a filthy bargain with the Cheney war-hawks in Washington, and more and more people in Britain recognize this. Blair ended his speech with a pathetic cheer: “Europe and America together. Britain in the thick of it. The world, a darn sight safer as a result.”

Just two days later, 30 people, including Italian policemen, were slaughtered in the worst guerrilla bombing so far in the war.