

# Tony Blair, Bush's 'Busted Flush'<sup>1</sup>

by Alan Clayton

The re-election of George W. Bush is having a highly destabilizing effect on the political position of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. A member of Blair's own Cabinet, Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell, appeared on television to say that "the Labour Party is very disappointed that George Bush was re-elected as U.S. President this week." Until now, no member of the government has acknowledged the Labour Party's deep hostility to Mr. Bush and his Republican Administration, or the hopes that John Kerry, the Democratic candidate, would oust him.

"There's obviously great disappointment among Labour Party members that John Kerry didn't make it, and I think there were great hopes at the end that the Republican President would be replaced by a Democratic President," Jowell said.

During the American campaign, Blair came close to undermining his own claims to be neutral in the election, first by stopping Labour from sending its traditional delegation to the Democratic convention in August, and then, on the morning of Nov. 3, European time, by telephoning Mr. Bush before all the results were declared, and before Mr. Kerry had conceded. With a general election due in May or June of next year, a lot of Labour parliamentarians are getting increasingly concerned that Blair's continuing closeness to Bush could cost them their seats.

## The Black Watch

A huge political storm has erupted about the deployment of a famous Scottish regiment, the Black Watch, to relieve U.S. Marines south of Baghdad, right before the U.S. elections. The army chiefs of both the U.S. and British armies claimed this was a strategic necessity to release the U.S. Marines for an assault on Fallujah. However, there is widespread belief that the deployment was not strategic at all, but political. As John Kerry's accusations that Bush has acted alone in the invasion of Iraq began to bite, it was felt by many in the U.K. press that the President was desperate to counter this by having British soldiers in the very thick of the conflict, and not simply in the more peaceful areas around Basra.

The price in life was paid very quickly. The Black Watch were deployed in handing out leaflets that had the Scottish

Saltire flag (which bears the cross of St. Andrew), and not the British Union flag. This, it was felt, would have a greater impact on the Iraqis. However such a deployment made the troops highly vulnerable to suicide-type attacks, and this is exactly what happened when three young soldiers were killed on Nov. 4. A few days later, another soldier was killed in a similar attack, and several were badly injured.

The Black Watch were named the "ladies from hell" by German troops in the trenches in World War I, who had to watch the screaming masses of enemy soldiers charging towards them wearing what appeared to be skirts. Scottish soldiers have never worn kilts in combat situations since then, but the name of 'ladies from hell' has stayed with them.

Scotland has always taken pride in the international status of its soldiers, but recently public perceptions have shifted, and the number of economic conscripts to its regiments has dried up, because Britain's endless wars, and, in particular, the present war against Iraq, have frightened many young people away. Now, the Blair government plans to reduce the number of Scottish regiments to one, and the result is that the Black Watch had its tour of duty in Iraq extended to another full term. When Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon told the Parliament Oct. 21 that Britain would have "failed in our duty as an ally" if it turned down the U.S. request for help, the reaction was strong, even among pro-war MPs. Labour MP Andrew MacKinlay, an outspoken supporter of the war, said that the proposed redeployment was a bridge too far even for him, and begged Mr. Hoon to reconsider.

"There has not been a single member of the parliamentary Labour Party supporting this deployment," he told the Commons. Almost every newspaper predicts that if any Black Watch soldiers are killed, they will have "died for Bush."

## The Tabloid Press

The tabloid press has gone after Blair with venom on this issue. The main Scottish tabloid, the *Daily Record*, has gone in with both boots. On Nov. 6, the paper carried a full front-page story of the event, giving Black Watch troops space to vent their anger.

"The grieving brother of Black Watch soldier Paul Lowe last night laid the blame for his death in Iraq at the feet of Prime Minister Tony Blair," said the front page splash. "Craig Lowe, who also serves with the regiment, said: 'Blair sent us in to do the Americans' dirty work in a war we shouldn't be fighting.'" The *Record* reported the 18-year-old fighting back tears as he spoke of the loss of his older brother and two comrades in the suicide bomb attack.

Craig, one of the youngest members of the Black Watch to serve in the Iraq war zone, was back in Scotland on a training course when he learned of his brother's death. At the family home in Kelty, Fife, said the newspaper, he revealed that his dead brother thought little of U.S. President George Bush and his reasons for going to war. The dead soldier, his brother said: "just thought Bush was an arsehole for starting

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1. The term "busted flush" is an often-used expression, referring to a poker hand which failed to make the grade as a flush, a high-value hand.

a war over nothing, trying to get money and oil. We all thought that. Although I'm a professional soldier and enjoy what I do, I don't agree with what's going on in the Middle East."

The *Record* used another quote from Craig as its headline: "If Tony Blair had the balls to walk down my street I'd run out with my little brother, Stuart, and we'd knock him out. We wouldn't hesitate."

The mother of another soldier of a Scottish regiment, Rose Gentle, whose 19-year-old son Gordon of the Royal Highland Fusiliers was killed in a roadside explosion in Basra in June, told the press: "It just brings everything back to you. It just shouldn't have been allowed to happen—it's a disgrace that they were there in the first place."

"My heart goes out to the families of those three boys, I know what they'll be going through. I just pray that no one else gets that knock on the door. And I hope Tony Blair keeps his promise to bring the boys back by Christmas." Mrs. Gentle launched legal action against the British government over Gordon's death after the *Daily Record* revealed he was not issued with vital equipment.

## Body Bags

On Nov. 10, relatives of British soldiers killed in Iraq delivered a wreath to No. 10 Downing Street. The families used the occasion to demand that British troops be withdrawn from the "lunacy" of the conflict. Poignantly, the father of one Black Watch soldier who has been killed, said Prime Minister Tony Blair had kept his promise about the Black Watch being home for Christmas—but they were being brought back in body bags.

Reg Keys, whose son, Lance Corporal Thomas Keys, a member of the Royal Military Police, was murdered by a mob last year, said that the families were not radical left-wingers or anti-Army. Some of them had other sons in the services, but they were making their stand because they did not want them to be killed.

Feelings were running so high that James Buchanan, father of two serving Black Watch soldiers, threatened to "slit the throat" of Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon if he saw him in the street.

He said two of his son's friends were among the four who have died in recent days, including Craig's best man, Marc Ferns, 21. As the London protest gathered momentum, it was revealed that another Black Watch soldier was injured in a mortar attack on the regiment's base.

Yet, Tony Blair is flying to the United States to meet President Bush on Armistice Day, of all days; Armistice Day, which marks the end of the dreadful slaughter of World War I, is still solemnly celebrated in the United Kingdom. Blair is hoping that some of the kudos of the Bush victory will rub off on him. However, the consensus of opinion on both sides of the Atlantic is that Bush now views Blair as a "busted flush" that he would rather not have anywhere near his geopolitical card game.