

Britain: Internal party revolt seeks Blair's removal

By [Chris Marsden](#)

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's days in office are numbered. While it is not possible to determine precisely when he will go, what is clear is the main reason for his political demise—the reverberations from his support for the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The Labour Party is being rent by factional warfare between Blair loyalists and the supporters of Chancellor Gordon Brown. But there is not a shred of political principle between the two camps.

This division has been a permanent feature of the Labour government since Blair outmanoeuvred Brown to become party leader following the death of John Smith. Afterwards, the prime minister was able to push his erstwhile rival into a corner with promises that at the appropriate time he would inherit the Blairite mantle.

He is no longer able to do so because his standing has been fatally undermined by Labour's foreign policy.

There is no disagreement between Blair and Brown on any issues of substance. Both the chancellor and his supporters boast of his role as the co-architect of "New Labour" and its pro-business agenda. One of the eight junior members of government whose resignations brought the party's leadership crisis to a head described himself and his colleagues as "utter Labour loyalists and implacable modernizers."

Nor has Brown ever issued a word of criticism over Blair's foreign policy. What motivates the latest outbreak of factional in-fighting is anxiety amongst Brown and his supporters over the haemorrhaging of Labour's electoral support. But this in turn is bound up with massive popular opposition to the Iraq war, which has only deepened since 2003.

Politically, there has long been a widespread belief within ruling circles that Blair has received very little in return for his slavish support for the Bush administration over Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is not only that the US-led occupation has been a disaster, with Iraq in the midst of a de facto civil war. Afghanistan too has proved to be no less of a debacle. British troops are facing a worsening situation in the south of Iraq at a time when additional forces are being dispatched to Afghanistan, where they face fierce resistance from those opposed to the occupation force as well as local drug lords and impoverished farmers who are dependent on the opium/heroin trade.

However, if Blair was already crippled by these events, his fate was sealed by his backing for the US-Israeli war against Lebanon. By this time the setbacks suffered by British imperialism took on the dimensions of a national humiliation.

Whereas Blair once argued with his critics that he alone could act as a restraining influence on Washington because he had earned the respect of the White House, Lebanon showed him as little more than a lap dog. Bush's infamous "Yo, Blair!" during the G8 summit and his contemptuous dismissal of the prime minister's offer to act as a go-between in the Middle East underscored how little real influence Blair enjoys.

The prime minister's subservience to Washington was epitomised by his refusal to make even a formal call for a ceasefire. Once again Blair was convinced that the superior fire-power enjoyed by the US and its Israeli ally would ensure victory. And once again he was indifferent to the overwhelming popular opposition to the Israeli aggression at home and abroad.

Even when Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora appealed to Blair to support an immediate ceasefire, citing the historic ties between his country and Britain, Blair remained silent.

It fell to the United Nations to try and extricate the US and Israel from the latest crisis they had created in the Middle East, while Blair was told by one of its leading officials to stay out of any negotiations as he was too closely associated with Washington.

Media commentators in the UK were reduced to gazing enviously at the position taken by France, which was able to become a key player in the Lebanese crisis by combining calls for a ceasefire with horse-trading with the US over assuming leadership of a UN military force.

This global drama unfolded under conditions in which Britain was plunged into a security scare as a result of an alleged terror plot to blow up transatlantic flights. Despite claims that the UK was facing its gravest danger since the threat of Nazi invasion, this did not cause the prime minister to break his holiday in the Caribbean, during which he issued barely a word on either the alleged plot or Lebanon.

By this time even the most spineless of Blair's opponents had concluded that they were staring into the abyss—and not just electorally. Everyone knew that the US-sponsored Israeli attack on Lebanon was only a precursor to a planned wider Middle Eastern war against Iran and Syria—one that must have even more terrible consequences than Iraq.

When the Israeli offensive ended badly, Brown's supporters expected Blair to finally give a date for his departure. When he not only failed to do so, but announced instead that he would be launching a raft of policies at the Labour Party conference later this month to secure his "legacy," the resignation letters were drafted in order to force his hand.

If the crisis over Britain's foreign policy finds only the most partial and distorted expression in the internal manoeuvrings against Blair, the other major cause of the government's crisis finds none at all.

Opposition to the war against Iraq is bound up with and fuelled by broader dissatisfaction with the government's right-wing domestic agenda.

This is reflected in mounting public concern over the attacks on civil liberties that are an integral component of the predatory foreign policy being pursued in the Middle East. The millions of people who concluded that Iraq was a war waged on the basis of lies have no greater confidence in the government's claim to be waging a "war on terror." They

recognise that the terrorist threat is a by-product of Blair's war-mongering, and that the threat is being manipulated and exaggerated to serve Blair's own agenda.

More fundamental still, the hostility to Blair and the constantly diminishing support for his government are rooted in the unprecedented growth in social inequality over which Labour has presided since taking office in 1997.

The central tenet of Blair's political philosophy is that the role of government is to implement policies that directly serve the interests of a financial oligarchy that determines world affairs—a ruling elite that has accrued enormous wealth through its domination of global markets. These policies centre on the dismantling of the old mechanisms of the welfare state, shifting the tax burden away from the major corporations and the elimination of all obstacles to the exploitation of the working class.

It is impossible to secure popular support for a government that sets out to fleece the mass of the people in order to fill the pockets of the rich. But Blair calculated that as long as he enjoyed the support of the likes of Rupert Murdoch, his leadership was assured. His hubris was fuelled by the degeneration and decay of the very labour movement of which he was the titular head, with the result that the interests and aspirations of the working class find no expression within the official political set-up, allowing Blair to proclaim his indifference to the popular will.

Nevertheless, class tensions, however inchoate, grow ever more acute. Millions of former labour voters have turned their backs on the government, threatening Labour with electoral meltdown. But this is only an initial expression of the social and political turmoil to come.

The belated move by the Brownites against Blair is little more than a desperate attempt to save their own skins and rescue the New Labour project. It offers no viable alternative foreign policy for the British bourgeoisie, much less any respite for the millions of working people who want rid of Blair and everything he stands for.

All Brown has ever wanted—and all he continues to demand—is a “stable and orderly transition.” But he is no more in charge of political events than Blair.

The Labour Party has, in fact, been irrevocably destabilised and will in all likelihood face a bitter leadership contest, with one or more pro-Blair candidates coming forward against Brown. Blair's statement yesterday that he will go within 12 months will do nothing to prevent such a further descent into internecine strife.

Whoever eventually assumes leadership of the party will be handed a poisoned chalice. Indeed, Blair is correct in one thing—it is not only his political neck that is on the line. Moreover, if Conservative Party leader David Cameron is presently enjoying a degree of *schadenfreude* at Labour's expense, this too will be short-lived.

The divisions that are wracking the bourgeoisie over foreign policy also run through the Conservatives and they remain deeply unpopular and without any substantial social base. What is unfolding in Britain is not the crisis of one man or even one party, but a crisis of political rule.

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