

# Major in trouble over parliamentary defeat

by Mark Burdman

“What we are watching is not the decline of a man. It is the implosion of a government.” This was the comment of senior London *Guardian* political correspondent Hugo Young on Dec. 8, on the subject of the stunning defeat suffered by Prime Minister John Major’s government in the British House of Commons on Dec. 6. By a vote of 319-311, the government lost the vote on a bill that would have imposed a Value Added Tax (VAT) on home fuel and electricity. The bill was extremely unpopular among significant segments of the electorate. The vote was lost when several Tory rebels and members of the usually pro-Conservative Ulster Unionist Party bolted from Major, to align with the opposition Labour Party.

Commentator Young warned that Britain was now faced with “an impasse of chronic non-government. . . . The spectacle we must now prepare for, a governing party inflicting its rage on the body politic for the next two years, is terrible. Whether Major stays or goes is almost incidental to this. The rage will undoubtedly outlast him.”

George Jones, political correspondent for the pro-Conservative *Daily Telegraph*, said the consensus within Tory circles can be summed up in four words: “This can’t go on.” The Tories, according to this view, are “in danger of falling apart after 15 years in power.” The “draining away” of the government’s authority will be excruciating unless something drastic is done to reverse the trend; it will be like “death by a thousand cuts rather than a single blow.”

The Dec. 6 result was all the more devastating in that the government, only one week earlier, had gone to great lengths to avoid losing a vote on a bill involving funding for the European Union. Major had done this by a “suicide pact,” threatening that he would effectively collapse his own government if he were to lose the vote. Nonetheless, eight Tories, so-called Euro-skeptics, opposed to tighter ties with the continent, voted against the government. They were then disciplined by having their party privileges stripped away. But, as the *Telegraph’s* Jones emphasizes, the tactic “back-fired spectacularly,” when almost all of these eight then voted against Major on the VAT issue, causing the government’s defeat, while winning tremendous popular support. Kenneth Baker, the former British home secretary and erstwhile Major loyalist, attacked the prime minister for “crass stupidity” in the way he has handled the rebel challenge.

## ‘Like a pack of demented Corgis’

The Tories’ woes are deeply intertwined with, and in many ways caused by, the ever-increasing difficulties of the House of Windsor. The Tories are only portraying themselves as the die-hard defenders of a royal house that is more and more discredited in the eyes of large numbers of Britons. This was addressed by senior *Financial Times* correspondent Joe Rogaly on Dec. 6, who mocked Major for engaging in the “anachronistic fantasy” of conjuring up “an ancient mirage of national glory,” by defining defense of the monarchy as “the highest cause” to which the Conservatives would be committed.

The newest phase in the fall of the House of Windsor was the proposal floated first by Labour Party “shadow” Home Secretary Jack Straw and then by other leading Labour spokesmen, that the monarchy’s prerogatives be sharply curtailed, and that the number of “working” members of the royal family be reduced to a maximum of six. This drew howls of protest from Conservative spokesmen.

However, the attempt at a united pro-monarchy front collapsed when Conservative MP George Walden, a former minister in a Conservative government, rose in the House of Commons and charged that those ministers in the Major cabinet who had savaged Straw were “hunting him like a pack of demented Corgis.” As everybody in Britain knows, the queen’s dogs are Welsh Corgis. He further warned that “the sneering Tory responses to Mr. Straw’s recent proposals seem to me unintelligent and outdated. I have no doubt they will ricochet on the Tories. If Labour play their cards right, they are on to a vote-winner at the next general election. We all like the queen and I am quite happy to leave her in her palace with a carriage or two, but the rest of them must shrink, and it would be sensible to do away with hereditary peers’ votes if we are going to be a party that encourages talent rather than connections.”

Straw was further boosted when the London *Guardian* on Dec. 7 published, as its lead story, an exposé about how nearly two out of three courtiers and staff of the royal household are living rent-free in the five palaces maintained by the taxpayer for the queen. Some are receiving enormous salaries.

MP Walden smells which way certain winds are blowing. Leading figures in the British establishment are evidently coming around to the idea that a “Labour option” might be the only way, in the short term, to stem the collapse. One such is the modern-day descendant of the 18th-century creator of British intelligence, the Second Earl of Shelburne (William Petty). His lordship has publicly stated the view that a “regeneration” of the monarchy can only come via a combination of bringing Prince Charles forward as heir, together with a Labour government being placed in power. Shelburne points to the curious fact that an “affinity” has always existed between “the aristocracy and the Labour Party.”