

Will Great Britain end up with a 'National Government' in 1997?

by Mark Burdman

Jan. 1, 1997 was almost certainly the last New Year's Day that John Major spent occupying the prime minister's office at 10 Downing Street. All signs are that the British royal family, the powerful and secretive Queen's Privy Council, and the Whitehall foreign and economic policy establishment have resolved on a new governing arrangement, centered around Labour Party leader Tony Blair as prime minister. The realization of these plans awaits the next general elections in the United Kingdom, legally mandated to take place no later than mid-May; they could take place earlier.

Spokesmen for the higher echelons of the British power structure are making no secret of their intentions. In early December, a leading retainer of the British royals confided to a journalist that the monarchy was "absolutely much more inclined to Labour" than to the ruling Conservatives, and hoped that Blair could provide a "substitute" policy to that of Major.

Speaking of the foreign and economic policy establishment, senior political columnist Michael Jones wrote in the London *Sunday Times* on Dec. 15 that "Whitehall is already looking forward to a change in the governing party, after 18 years" of the Conservatives being in power. One senior Whitehall figure whom Jones spoke to, "ran through his list of Labour hopefuls waiting to become ministers, with barely concealed relish."

Jones's evaluation is corroborated by readings obtained by *EIR* from senior policy officials linked either to the Foreign Office, or to the Foreign Office's chief "private" think-tank, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, or Chatham House.

What concerns the British establishment, is that the scandal- and faction-ridden Conservative government is absolutely unfit to deal with the crises, global and domestic, that are set to erupt in the coming weeks and months, particularly on the economic and financial side. The more sober elements of the establishment know that they won't be able, for much longer, to peddle delusions about a "coming economic upturn"—or what fools in Britain like to call the "feel-good factor." That delusionary state of mind was displayed by Major himself in a Dec. 22 interview on British television, when he assured the population that "tough times" were a thing of the past, and that they could now look forward to the

best economic prospects since World War II.

As the crisis deepens, anything associated with the legacy of Margaret Thatcher will have been so thoroughly discredited, that it will have to be dumped. The cited royal family retainer, for example, opined that "Thatcherite" policies had gone too far in undermining British institutions, including those associated with the monarchy and Church of England. Thatcherism had also undermined "our sense of communal life" and "our formerly accepted social conventions." Some new power combination would be required, centered around the person of Blair.

The ghost of Ramsay Macdonald?

For the establishment, a key point of reference for the plans for 1997, is the so-called National Government that was formed, in autumn 1931, under Labourite Ramsay MacDonald. This was a Labour-Conservative-Liberal coalition, formed with the approval of King George V under conditions of profound economic crisis, in order to have a cross-party consensus for imposing brutal austerity.

Such developments, today, might not take precisely the same form; but what can be surmised, for 1997, is that, should Blair win the general elections, he could well bring one or more senior figures from the Liberal Democratic Party, and possibly even from the Conservatives, into his cabinet. This would be the British variant of the "grand coalition" configuration that is being pushed in many countries, including in the United States. Such an arrangement might, indeed, reinforce such trends in the United States, especially as Blair has developed something of a personal relationship with the Clinton team, the which was consolidated during his mid-April 1996 trip to the United States.

The prospective Blair-led regime would promote the concept that the population's "basic needs" should be met, but at a sharply reduced overall standard of living. Coupled to this, would be the fostering of charismatic, irrational forms of "religiosity" in political and social life, to give a "spiritual" facade to the "fascism with a democratic, human face" that such a government would usher in. This will be a replacement for the past years' "cold" Thatcherite promotion of greed and accumulation of personal wealth.

Hence, the above-cited royal family retainer stressed that

“with Blair, the whole religious issue becomes more important.” He noted that Blair and about one-half of his shadow cabinet are “Christian Socialists,” in the tradition of classical British Fabian ideology. By contrast, “with John Major, his religious focus is nothing more than hatching, matching, and dispatching”—birth, marriage, and death. “The whole question of the religious basis of politics is now becoming pronounced. . . . This is a very strange period we are now entering, in which *experience and feeling*, not the economy nor political parties, will be having a profound influence on the political process.”

‘Face down in the gutter’

During December 1996, there was an acceleration in the process of decomposition of the Major government.

The most publicized issue of contention, has been what orientation the Conservatives would take toward Europe, the planned single European currency, the European Monetary Union, and so on. The so-called “Euro-skeptic” movement inside the party, of vocal members opposed to closer British integration with the European continent, has been abetted by what is, effectively, a splitter movement from outside the party. This is the Referendum Party, founded and led by Rothschild family cohort Sir James Goldsmith. As codified by the party’s first convention this past autumn, its entire purpose is to bring about a national referendum on whether Britain should associate itself with the Maastricht Treaty.

As most of Goldsmith’s base would come from Conservative ranks, and as votes for his candidates in the next general election would mainly come from Conservative sympathizers, one gets the distinct impression that what Sir James is doing, is part of the broader operation to get Blair into power. To this effect, it may be more than coincidental, that Goldsmith has received significant support from former senior Thatcher adviser Sir Charles Powell, whose brother Jonathan is the chief political aide to Tony Blair.

In December, the issue of Europe took on new problematic dimensions for Major and his government. On Dec. 7, the pro-Tory London *Daily Telegraph* headlined, “Major’s Worst Week,” writing of “the most turbulent week” since Major became prime minister six years ago. That week began on Monday, Dec. 2, when a big feud broke out, between Major’s office and Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke, about what Britain’s policy would be respecting the single European currency. As the week progressed, Clarke had to deny reports that he was considering resigning over the issue.

By Dec. 22, the controversy had gotten so far advanced, that the British press was speaking of an unprecedented split within the British cabinet. Major told a British television interviewer that the crisis was intense enough to split the Conservative Party in half, and that this was “the most explosive issue” facing the Tories in 150 years. He recalled that the fight within Tory ranks, then, over the promulgation of Britain’s



Labour Party shadow prime minister Tony Blair. A Blair government would give a “spiritual” facade to a regime of “fascism with a democratic, human face.”

Corn Laws, was so bitter, that the party was not able to regain power for 30 years.

During the week of Dec. 2, the fight over Europe was compounded by a number of other debacles. As the Dec. 7 *Daily Telegraph* article drily noted, on the same day, Dec. 2, that the Clarke-Major feud erupted, senior MP Sir Nicholas Scott, a former government minister, was dumped by his Kensington and Chelsea electoral constituency, “after being found face down in the gutter, after drinks at a party in Brighton.”

Metaphorically, the Tories were also “found face down in the gutter,” when a Gallup poll was released on Dec. 6 showing the lead of Labour over the Conservatives to be 37%, or 59% to 22%, up 10 percentage points from the previous such poll.

Also on Dec. 6, Major lost his parliamentary majority, when Tory MP Sir John Gorst, representing a constituency in London, announced that he was withdrawing his support for the government in protest against its refusal to renounce plans to close down a trauma unit at the Edgeware General Hospital in his constituency, by March 1997. Gorst charged that the government had “broken its trust” over the issue, and declared: “I do not put the survival of my party above the survival of individuals whose lives may be at risk.”

As we shall see below, the specific issue that motivated his action—the destruction of health care provision—is one that will be, as in the United States, at the top of the political agenda in coming weeks.

'Bumping off' John Major

A growing number of commentaries in the establishment press, is sounding the death-knell for Major and his team.

"A Winter of Discontent," is how the City of London's *Financial Times* headlined its Dec. 7 lead editorial, on the woes facing the Major government. The paper commented: "Time and hope are running out for Mr. John Major's administration. . . . This week has seen the government lurch from crisis to crisis." The paper concluded that "unless the Conservatives regain some sense of purpose in this winter of discontent," new elections will have to be held before the legal outer date of May 1997.

In his Dec. 15 *Sunday Times* piece cited above, Michael Jones wrote: "I can reveal that [former Foreign Secretary] Douglas Hurd is about to bump off the prime minister. He has yet to decide whether assassination is absolutely necessary, but my prediction is that his murderous instincts will get the better of him. Any connection between his fictional victim-to-be in his latest novel and real persons is, of course, entirely coincidental. The fact that the make-believe PM at Hurd's mercy is a Tory, is unfortunate."

"Does John Major stand a better chance of survival than Hurd's character?" Jones asked. "Judging by last week, his government's final days in office looks like being a messy and muddled business. . . . Despair has not yet engulfed the Tories, but it is not far off. . . . When Tory Members of Parliament realize there is nothing left in the locker, except the prospect of electoral defeat, we are likely to experience outbreaks of pre-traumatic shock on the back benches."

He concluded that 1997 "will be as bad for [the Tories] as 1996, probably worse."

The economic collapse: 'Some may die'

Such battles occur against the backdrop of a collapse of Britain's physical economy, brought about by almost two decades of Thatcherite policies. As the withdrawal of support for the government by Sir John Gorst indicates, one of the areas most devastated, is that of health care.

In the postwar period, Britain has had a government-run National Health Service. Up to 1979, when Margaret Thatcher came to power, the NHS had maintained a reasonably good record of inexpensive health care for substantial parts of the population, even if it operated according to the principle of keeping costs down, as a priority. But such approximate guarantees of "reasonable health care for all" went out the window, with the mad rush for "privatization" that Thatcher introduced. Everything was then subordinated to the drive for profit, and to the necessity for "competition." As one critic puts it, health care was "reinvented as a market." Hospitals and other health care facilities were redefined as "producers," establishing "contracts" with participating doctors.

In other words, Britain introduced a system similar to what is called "managed health care" in the United States

today. In fact, there has been a significant cross-fertilization of proposals for "health care reform" between British Thatcherite ideologues, and their "neo-conservative" co-thinkers in the United States.

On Nov. 4, the *Sunday Times* reported as its lead story, that the NHS is facing "its worst financial crisis in nearly a decade," and will witness a winter of "cuts and chaos." Many hospitals "are being forced to cut services, postpone operations, and extend waiting lists from a year up to 18 months." Others "warn they will have to start rationing services in winter, as the health authorities which fund them run out of money, months before the end of the financial year. In some hospitals, the situation has so deteriorated, that patients seeking routine operations, have been told they will not have an initial consultation until well into next year."

On Nov. 10, Dr. Nigel Sewell, chief executive of an NHS Trust in Sutton, England, warned that half a million people, in London alone, will be denied medical care, if proposed cuts in the NHS go through. These people would "suffer disabling pain and discomfort, while some may even die waiting for treatment. This is not what people expect from their National Health Service," Sewell said.

Local general practitioners announced that they were writing to all their patients, asking them to complain to their parliamentarians about the situation. Former Junior Health Minister (in a Labour government) Dr. John Dunwoody said that patients must be told "what is going on. We want patients to write to their Member of Parliament. All local General Practitioners, irrespective of [political] party, are very concerned." According to Dunwoody, proposed cuts in some categories of non-urgent surgery were almost up to 80%.

Meanwhile, the farce of subordinating all considerations to cost-cutting was underscored by a Dec. 15 dispatch in the London *Observer*. The weekly reported that British hospitals could face "prolonged [natural] gas cuts this winter," forcing them to rely on expensive emergency heating fuel. The reason? "Cash-strapped" health authorities and trusts "have signed cost-saving contracts, that provide cheap gas but allow suppliers to turn off the gas, for up to 90 days. These so-called 'interruptible' gas contracts are typically 40% cheaper than those that guarantee supply. Gas can be cut off at only four hours' notice."

While there have been such contracts in the past, hospitals have rarely been cut off. This winter will be the first in which gas suppliers disrupt gas flow for long periods. A spokesman for British Gas, commenting on these developments, told the paper: "This is one of the downsides of privatization and market forces."

Such devolution of health care comes amidst spread of dangerous diseases. To cite one example, the incidence of meningitis has been rising for the past two years, and is now at record levels, with 2,042 cases as of Nov. 15, 1996, compared with 1,827 for the whole of the previous year.