

Institutional Revolt Weakens Blair

by Mary Burdman

After a wild battle in the British Parliament over the Labour Party government's awful "Prevention of Terrorism Bill," the political situation in Britain is now more volatile than it has been since Summer 2003, when the death of Iraq arms inspector Dr. David Kelly shook Downing Street. Although the very controversial emergency bill was passed on March 11, after a 30-hour, overnight debate which sent the bill "ping-ponging" between the Houses of Commons and Lords, Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, had to back down on critical issues, which even hours before, they had been hotly denying they would ever yield to the opposition.

In the aftermath, seasoned observers of British politics are saying that for the first time in since mid-2003, Blair is seriously weakened, as he faces the national elections, tentatively scheduled for May 5. Although it is not likely that Labour would lose, the party could return with a much-reduced majority, down from the 167 it won in 2001. If just 50 Labour MPs lose their seats to opposition Tories or Liberal Democrats, Blair's majority would fall to below 70. Given the narrow margins by which Labour has won critical votes in past months, the government would be vulnerable, going into a very tumultuous period.

An Unpopular War

In Britain, the Iraq war is *very* unpopular, across all party lines. It is notable that when Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi announced March 15 that Italy would start pulling troops out of Iraq in six months, he added that he had spoken of constructing a "precise exit strategy" with Tony Blair. British troops are having to expand their operations, as more and more nations pull their forces out of Iraq. The majority of Labour voters hate Blair's alignment with the neo-con government of George W. Bush: "There is no way that Tony Blair could take Britain behind Bush into any kind of attack on Iran," senior sources have been telling *EIR* since the second Bush inauguration. Were Blair to do that, despite the lack of effective opposition in Britain, Blair would be out, the sources say.

Another source said that the "Blair-Bush axis—except with regard to Iraq—is beginning to cool. From Blair's selfish political point of view, Bush is *not* an asset."

Looming over everything, is the financial crisis. Every week there are new warnings in the British establishment financial press, about the dangers posed by the huge debt bubbles. Britain's entire economy is basically an extension of the City of London; what little industry remains is being rapidly shut down under the New Labour regime. Industrial jobs in Britain fell from 4.52 million in 1997, when Labour came to power, to 3.53 million now, and manufacturers expect many more jobs to be shipped overseas in the coming years. Under these conditions, if the financial system cracks, Britain cracks with it.

One plus, is that the upcoming elections will be a lot more exciting than people had anticipated. Although the parliamentary constituencies are drawn in such a way that they greatly favor Labour—many inner city Labour seats have far fewer voters than suburban constituencies which tend more to the Tories—there is going to be a lot of "tactical" voting. Many previously strong Labour supporters are saying that they simply cannot vote for Blair again. Also, the Liberal Democrats, with their staunch opposition to the Iraq war, are increasingly influential, and could win a significant group of seats.

Upheaval in the Lords

The revolt in the Parliament, and especially in the House of Lords, over the "Prevention of Terrorism Bill, was a "serious matter," senior British political observers told *EIR*. The Tories under Michael Howard, weak as they are, were seen dealing Labour a real defeat, and the Liberal Democrats emerged as a real force. The House of Lords is no longer a collection of landed aristocrats: Its members are senior political leaders of all parties—most of them former Cabinet members—and non-partisan senior figures from the legal and other professions, called "cross-benchers" because they do not vote on party lines.

At issue was an emergency bill to replace the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act which had been rushed through Parliament in 2001 by then-Home Secretary David Blunkett after Sept. 11. His bill—an outrageous violation of human rights—allowed unlimited detention, without trial, of foreigners suspected of terrorism; he also supported the creation of the Serious Organized Crime Agency, a British FBI-style national police force, and other police-state measures. Last December, a special panel of Law Lords—senior judges who are members of the House of Lords and act as a final "court" on legal matters in Britain—ruled eight-to-one that the 2001 bill violated the European Human Rights Act. Usually only five law lords form such a panel, but this case is so important that nine were included.

The Lords were ruling on an appeal brought by 9 of the 11 foreign detainees who have been held without trial in British prisons for up to three years. Belmarsh prison, where most of them were, is known as "Britain's Guantanamo Bay." Foreign suspects considered not in danger of torture or the death pen-

alty in their home nations, are deported. On Dec. 16, as the Law Lords delivered their decision, Blunkett himself had to resign, because of one of the bigger sex scandals in Britain in some time. He was replaced by Education Secretary Charles Clarke.

Lord Hoffmann commented on the bill: “It calls into question the very existence of an ancient liberty of which this country has until now been very proud: freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention. . . . The real threat to the life of the nation . . . comes not from terrorism but from laws such as these,” a view echoed by many of his peers. “This is a nation which has been tested in adversity, which has survived physical destruction and catastrophic loss of life. I do not underestimate the ability of fanatical groups to kill or destroy, but they do not threaten the life of the nation. Whether we should survive Hitler hung in the balance, but there is no doubt we shall survive al-Qaida,” Lord Hoffman concluded.

Violating the Magna Carta

Despite the Law Lords’ ruling, new Home Secretary Clarke kept the suspects in prison, and then submitted a new law, which had to be pushed through Parliament before the old one expired March 14. Clarke’s bill was hardly an improvement: It allowed the Home Secretary to issue harsh control orders, including for house arrest under severe restrictions, on both foreign nationals and Britons alike! This provision violates the Magna Carta. As in the 2001 bill, suspects can be detained without charges or trial, and with no right to even know the evidence against them, or to legal representation of their choice. Clarke’s only concession to the Law Lords’ ruling—at first—was that the suspects were not to be imprisoned. Clarke’s law gave the Home Secretary, and not the courts, the power to impose the new control measures—something that had not been allowed in Britain since the end of World War II.

The bill got through the Commons Feb. 28, but debate was hot. Clarke had to make an important concession, by agreeing that judges, and not ministers, would have the final say on house arrest orders. A cross-party group of MPs demanded an amendment to have judges decide on all control orders, not just house arrest. The amendment lost by only 14 votes, with 60 Labour MPs voting against Clarke. The “rebels” included ten former Blair ministers. The entire bill passed by a majority of only 53 in the 659-seat Commons, where Labour has 413 members.

This all went on against a background of extreme claims from the government, about the level of the terrorism “threat.” Everything from the upcoming election campaign to the wedding of Prince Charles in April, is touted as a terror target. Blair claimed on radio that “several hundred” suspected terrorists are being watched in Britain, although this number is “far in excess of what intelligence officials estimate,” which is more like 40, the BBC retorted.

Clarke cut debate short in the Commons, but he could

not do that in the Lords. On March 7, the Lords voted up a Liberal Democratic amendment that only a judge could impose *any* kind of control order, by a 249-119 majority—the biggest parliamentary defeat this government has had. Twenty Labour peers, including the former Chancellor—and mentor of Tony Blair—Lord Irvine and four other former ministers, supported the majority. Former Metropolitan Police Commissioner Lord Condon also voted against the government, undermining Blair’s contention that police and security services unanimously support his legislation. The Lords voted up—with big majorities—several other amendments to increase the powers of the courts over the ministry, at every level.

While the Labour rebellion in the Commons was rapidly reduced, Tories and Liberal Dems stuck to their key amendments, the Tories calling for a “sunset clause” that would have the new legislation automatically expire by the end of the year. Blair rejected the offer, but this was to prove his comeuppance: It was on this issue that the government finally had to compromise, in all but the letter of the law. In the House of Lords, strong opposition to the bill continued, threatening to provoke a constitutional crisis. Blair ranted about taking the issue to the voters, but this might not be a solution: Most people in Britain are clearly concerned about security, but do not necessarily think that Blair’s measures are the answer.

After an almost unprecedented, all-night marathon, Blair gave a press conference March 11 announcing—despite his repeated declarations of “no more compromises”—that both Houses of Parliament would get full ability to debate and amend a new bill to replace the current emergency legislation, within a year. Amid the turmoil, the imprisoned terror suspects were released on bail March 11, although under strict surveillance conditions. Howard called the Blair compromise a “sunset clause in all but name.”

Still More Problems for Blair

Blair has more problems. The key question of the “legality” of the Iraq war continues to haunt him. Controversy continues over the two-page parliamentary answer submitted on March 17, 2003, by Attorney General Lord Goldsmith, which, on top of the now totally discredited “Weapons of Mass Destruction” hoax, tipped the balance in the Parliament to support the invasion. Reportedly, Goldsmith had written a longer statement, questioning the legality of the invasion, just 10 days earlier, but this Downing Street refuses to publish.

On March 10, Cabinet Secretary Sir Andrew Turnbull asserted that there never had been any full legal statement by Goldsmith, which would mean that his short answer was the government’s “definitive advice” on the war. Britain’s information commissioner, Richard Thomas, has launched an investigation into the refusal to publish what Goldsmith wrote, based on the new Freedom of Information Act.