

'End of Cheney' Blows Back Into Britain

by Mary Burdman

The scandals about the lies and deception used to launch the Iraq War—the real reason U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney is on the way out—are reverberating into Britain. Cheney's key international ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, lost a crucial vote in the House of Commons Nov. 9. The issue was the most extreme measure in Blair's new "Anti-Terrorism" bill, which would have allowed authorities to detain terrorism suspects for 90 days without charges. This was Blair's first defeat in a Parliament vote since his "New Labour" came to power in 1997, and the third big political blow Blair suffered in a week. More are coming.

What is happening in Britain is not due to internal politics, but the direct result of the upheavals in Washington. In ideology, Blair is heir to the "liberal imperialist" faction of the British empire, the direct antecedents of today's neo-conservatives. Although Britain is much diminished in world politics today, the financial influence of the City of London remains heavy. A fundamental shift in U.S. political and economic policy, "blowing back" into Britain, will have a big effect. This is the real importance of the developments in London.

Two years ago, Blair was able to beat down the scandals which erupted about the "sexed-up," faked "intelligence" dossiers used to get the Parliament to vote for war. In January 2004, Lord Hutton produced a notorious whitewash of the events surrounding the death of Dr. David Kelly, an Iraq weapons inspector who had leaked his doubts about this "intelligence" to the BBC. In revenge, Blair crushed the opposition at the BBC. Now things are different. And the more the truth comes out in London, the bigger the pressure on the neo-cons in Washington.

Hanging heaviest over Blair's head, is the pressure being mounted by a multi-party group of Members of Parliament, who are launching an unprecedented inquiry into Iraq, journalist Micheal Smith reported in the Nov. 6 *Sunday Times*. It was Smith who earlier broke the story of the "Downing St. memos," leaked government documents which demonstrated the level of connivance between London and Washington to lie in order to bring their nations into the war. A coalition of Tory and Labour MPs, with the backing of the smaller parties, the Liberal Democrats and Scottish and Welsh Nationalists, wants to set up a Commons committee to examine "the conduct of ministers" both before and after the war, Smith wrote. They want to create a committee of seven privy counsellors (senior counsellors to the monarchy and government), who



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Tony Blair's famous plastic smile is growing weaker by the day, as the political assault in Washington on his ally Dick Cheney begins to erode his own base of support.

would be able to see all sensitive documents and call any witnesses they wanted, including intelligence chiefs.

A key issue would be the failure to plan for the aftermath of the war, Smith quoted Tory MP Douglas Hogg as saying. Liberal Democrat Sir Menzies Campbell said: "Information that has emerged, in particular the memos leaked to *The Sunday Times*, strengthen overwhelmingly the case for an inquiry into the judgments of ministers, and in particular the prime minister, in the run-up to war and thereafter." Glasgow's *Sunday Herald* reported on Nov. 13 that as many as 200 MPs from all parties, could support this motion. The effort could "finish Tony Blair," one organizer said.

"Times are tough," Blair complained Nov. 3, with good reason. On Nov. 2, his close ally David Blunkett had to resign from the Cabinet for the second time in ten months, because of personal scandals. The same day, one clause of the anti-terror bill, which makes "indirect incitement to terrorism" an offense, squeaked through the Commons by just one vote, although the Labour majority is 66. Then, on Nov. 5, the first installment of the memoirs of Sir Christopher Meyer, who was U.K. Ambassador in Washington during 1997-2003 and an insider in the machinations to launch the war, appeared in *The Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*. Meyer told *The Guardian* that the continued presence of U.S. and U.K. troops in Iraq is motivating the insurgency and "home grown terrorism." The situation in Iraq "does not look good," he said.

'Goodbye Dear Dick'

It is no secret in Britain, who the core problem in Washington is. Dick Cheney is "the vice that dooms Bush," *Guardian* columnist Peter Preston wrote Nov. 14. "The president's allegiance to Dick Cheney consigns him to irrelevance and his country to chaos. . . . Cheney is . . . too old, too sick, and in too much trouble. . . . Every time he climbs into some bully

pulpit and snarls defiance, Bush's ratings slide again. . . . Goodbye dear Dick, your time is up." The City of London's *Economist* also condemned the "increasingly error-prone vice-president, Dick Cheney," in an editorial Nov. 10 harshly critical of the Administration's refusal to condemn use of torture. *The Economist* denounced Cheney for "trying to bully senators to exclude America's spies from any torture ban," and because he even "has not had the guts to make his case in public." On Nov. 6, Michael Smith had written in *The Sunday Times* on the "Niger yellowcake" scandal, that speculation is mounting "that two of the most powerful figures in Washington—Dick Cheney, the vice-president, and Karl Rove, political adviser to President George W Bush—would also be implicated," because the scandal "feeds on the increasingly bitter debate about the war in Iraq [and] threatens the authority of an increasingly lame-duck second-term president."

Shakespeare in Parliament

Blair's worst day—so far—was Nov. 9, when his 90-day-detention clause went down. Despite his impassioned speeches, two days of arm-twisting of "rebel" MPs, media hysteria, and heavy police lobbying, the measure was voted down 322 to 291—a much bigger margin than expected. Blair had even got Chancellor Gordon Brown and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to rush back to London from trips to Israel and Russia, to support the government, and Labour Chairman Ian McCartney, who is recovering from heart surgery, also came in to vote. But some 49 Labour MPs, including 11 former ministers, defied their party's line. The Commons approved a compromise allowing a 28-day detention period.

"When does a rebellion become a revolution? . . . Perhaps it is the moment" when a Labour rebel "starts quoting Shakespeare against his leader. At that point you truly know something has shifted in British politics," wrote *The Times*' Ben Macintyre Nov. 12. During the Nov. 9 debate, Frank Dobson, whom Macintyre described as "a grumpy Labour backbencher and former minister," quoted from the song "Fear no more the heat o' the sun," from *Cymbeline*. "Fear no more the frown o' the great/ Thou art past the tyrant's stroke," Dobson told Blair. This is the song that the two lost princes, Arviragus and Guiderius, sing for their disguised sister Imogen, who appears dead.

The vote was a so-called "three-line whip," meaning so important that the clauses of the bill are underlined three times, and voting on the party line is required. Rebels can be expelled from the party for failure to support a three-line whip—if the party leader has the power to do so. This was the biggest government defeat on a "three-line whip" bill since 1979. The Labour rebels are warning that Blair will face more such opposition, when he tries to push through such controversial proposals as increased privatization of the health and education sectors, and plans to update the Trident nuclear deterrent.

Both the Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties are

calling for investigation of the use of senior police officers to pressure MPs to support the 90-day clause. The Association of Chief Police Officers had asked senior police officers to write and telephone MPs, at the request of Home Secretary Charles Clarke. Tory defense spokesman Gerald Howarth said: "Tony Blair suborned the intelligence services to bring pressure on MPs with warnings of death and destruction if we did not remove Saddam Hussein. Charles Clarke, probably at the behest of the Prime Minister, is now suborning police officers to put pressure on MPs."

Then a day later, the government-selected group of British Islamic leaders asked to assess the situation after the July 7 London bombings, put out their report, saying that British foreign policy—"especially in the Middle East"—is a "key contributing factor" in spurring Muslims in the U.K. toward extremism. The Islamic leaders also attacked Blair's proposed anti-terrorism legislation, and repeated demands for a public inquiry into the causes and aftermath of the July 7 and July 21 terrorist attacks. The group emphatically denounced use of terrorism.

Trouble in Afghanistan

More troubles loom. British officials are now urgently trying to build a coalition of nations to support the counter-insurgency battle in Afghanistan, after the United States pulls out 4,000 troops early next year, *Guardian* security editor Richard Norton-Taylor wrote. British forces will have to assume command of the Kabul-based International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which means committing another 2,000 troops for "peacekeeping." On top of this, Britain is to send another 2,000 troops to opium- and warlord-dominated Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. Britain already has 8,500 troops in southeast Iraq. The remaining U.S. military will keep control of the "war on terror," but, Norton-Taylor wrote, the "U.S. is not particularly interested in attacking the Afghan opium crop, say British officials. Most of the heroin produced ends up on the streets of Europe, not America. It also does not want to provoke the warlords."

France, Germany, and Italy have refused to allow their troops to participate in counter-insurgency combat operations, so the British military will hold talks with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and other countries on the issue before the Dec. 7 NATO meeting in Brussels. Only the Netherlands, Denmark, and Estonia have agreed to support the U.K. forces. *The Guardian* cited one military officer saying that fighting the warlords, drug traffickers, Taliban, and "al-Qaeda wannabes" in Helmand province, "could take longer to crack than Iraq. It could take 10 years."

Britain has already fought three wars in Afghanistan—in 1842, in 1880, and in 1919—and suffered some of its worst military defeats there. These wars were launched by the "Forward School," the British Empire's neo-conservatives—who lost their political power, just as Cheney and Blair are losing theirs.