

'Blairgate' Britain's Electoral Tsunami

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Global Research, May 05, 2005

16 June 2005

Region: [Europe](#)

In-depth Report: [FAKE INTELLIGENCE](#)

In this report Felicity Arbuthnot examines the mood in Britain, where war criminal prime minister Tony Blair faces the possibility of defeat in his Durham home riding in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

'Blairgate', the political tsunami threatening to engulf Britain's Blair government over the Iraq war, dodgy dossiers, dodgy advice by Lord Goldsmith, the Attorney General, two 'whitewash' Enquiries - Chaired by Lord Hutton and Lord Butler - and allegations that the Prime Minister even lied about lying, has thrown up some charismatic and unlikely political opponents running in key constituencies.

Lord Butler's Enquiry, however, it should be pointed out with the benefit of acres of newsprint hindsight, begins to look like a base coat, rather than a full whitewash. His Lordship allegedly might also been mislead by the Prime Minister and reportedly remarked of Lord Goldsmith:

'if he was my lawyer, I'd change him.'

From clarity to charisma. Craig Murray, 'our man in Blackburn' in the north of England, challenging the charismatically challenged Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, used to be 'our man in Uzbekistan', the British Ambassador. A diplomat with experience in Nigeria, Poland and Ghana, he was offered the Uzbekistan post in 2002. 'He said 'yes', put down the 'phone and took out the atlas to find out where it was.' 1.

Having found it, on arriving he quickly discovered the country's appalling human rights record - in a country where it seems both Britain and the US send suspects to be 'interrogated'. Murray returned to the UK, to report to the Foreign Office 'barbaric tactics' by the intelligence forces, including boiling a man alive. He was met, he says with 'indifference'. 2. The allegations he made resulted in leaks to the media that he had been selling passports for sex and had a drinking problem. Finally recalled, he was paid a hefty severance fee by the Foreign Office which he is putting to good use trying to overthrow its chief Minister.

Blackburn has a somewhat Uzbek style of democracy - attempting to hire public halls for their campaign's public meetings, refusal is mysteriously total - though Labour party members have no such problems. Murray is routinely asked to remove his posters - on 2nd May this applied to a meeting where the speaker was Moazzam Begg, a charismatic former prisoner in Guantanamo Bay, aid worker and book shop owner whose plight was long ignored by the Foreign Office. A dance hall was finally found for the occasion. Conservative Muslims - the Muslim vote is almost a quarter of the electorate - would have found this a

new experience.

Early in his campaign, says Murray, Muslim voters, given the draconian terrorist laws now in place and with Muslims incarcerated without charge in Belmarsh high security prison – and who knows, Uzbekistan – this population was reluctant even to leaflet, or help, should Jack Straw win and retaliate – that Britain with its ‘mother of parliaments’ – should have come to this. All that has now changed, Murray states. His ‘campaign bus’ is an ancient army ‘green goddess’, the services fire tenders. Reflecting charges of lack of, or shoddy equipment for soldiers, it failed to start for a while, but, like the campaign, suddenly burst into life. Murray now travels the constituency, standing on the back, car horns hooting approval, Muslim youth dancing behind, singing imaginative slogans ‘Strawman’, ‘last Straw’ ‘man of Straw’ cannot be far behind.

Murray believes another war can be stopped ‘right here in Blackburn.’ If The Foreign Secretary loses his seat, he contends, it would be near impossible for the Prime Minister to follow Bush into Iran or Syria. 3. A play based on Murray, ‘Talking to Terrorists’, is to be premiered in London. His book ‘Should not be Known’, is published later this year. ‘Nothing makes me so determined as injustice’, he said, in a call as I write. Perhaps he should be Foreign Secretary.

The Quiet Man who could Defeat the Prime Minister

If Blackburn is mildly Uzbek, fortress Sedgefield, The Prime Minister’s home in his Durham constituency would tempt his nemesis Saddam towards envy. Security for his seldom visited home in this ex-mining area – with its picturesque village green, welcoming tourist-postcard pubs, vibrant flowers tumbling from window boxes, brightening the duller northern day – is the proverbial ring of steel. Since sightings of their constituency MP are as rare as the dodo, considerable resentment and the expense he generates for the taxpayer is a frequent comment by locals. Another is that these dod-like appearances, they say, only occur when he wants a photo opportunity. One such was dubbed the ‘million pound pint.’

In an area where unemployment is high, the visit of Blair’s best buddy George W, Bush last year, to the village’s picturesque DunCow Inn caused fury. Weeks before, secret service agents were drafted in, police, locals say, searched homes for miles around, manhole covers were sealed. When the great day arrived, the consistent story is, those who did not leave their homes before breakfast for the business of the day, were locked down. Those who did could not return home till mid evening. One manual labourer in his fifties told me of being unable to get into his home for two hours after a grueling day – the road to his modest estate sealed off by police. Another said wryly, at his local pub, ‘if I hadn’t been let in at 7.45 a.m., I couldn’t have got here at all.’ Some hardships are more trying than others.

When the great moment arrived, police helicopters hovered over the green and ancient church, heavies with ear pieces hovered on the ground and a vast bullet proof motorcade swept down the sleepy, sunny street. The President and his pal posed for a photo opportunity outside the Inn with pints – reportedly alcohol free – disappeared inside for a meal in the charming, timbered hostelry – and swept out again. The whole exercise allegedly cost the local tax payers one million pounds. The landlord of another welcoming venue, the Hardwick Arms, stuck signs outside reading **‘No Protesters, No Press and No Presidents.’**

Just before the election was announced, a quiet, reserved man decided to run against the

Prime Minister. Reg Keys, a former paramedic training officer from further south in the Midlands, lost his twenty year old son, a military policeman, Tom who was killed with five colleagues in the eastern Iraqi town of Al Majar Al Kabir in June 2003. He spent endless months trying to find out what went wrong, writing to the Ministry of Defence, attending the Enquiry in Germany. He pieced many details together painstakingly, only to be telephoned by the Ministry of Defence he says and asked to desist, *'You are pissing off a lot of people in high places'* he claims he was told.

Al Majar, in fact is a poor, proud, clannish, conservative town, where if invited as a visitor, courtesy, tiny glasses of tea, food and courteous welcome would be proffered. Come as a fresh faced invaders telling this hierarchical society two to run their affairs could only end in disaster. In a complicated story, still not entirely unraveled, they six – their equipment entirely removed except for fifty rounds of bullets and radios fixed to vehicles. A crowd, believed to be of about five hundred attacked the police station after a series of incidents by coalition troops fuelled further resentment. When Tom's body was returned it had been hit by over thirty bullets and half his face was missing. In a terrible irony Tom's last conversation with his father recounted an incident which had disturbed him deeply. For no apparent reason a row of homes had been destroyed by allied missiles. Tom and his colleagues had helped a man dig his wife and young children from the rubble. Unable to get to the cemetery they helped him bury his family in some waste ground at the end of his street.

Afterwards, they asked him if they could take him anywhere. 'Where', he asked, 'I have no where to go', then 'yes, please, to my home.' He dug with his hands in the rubble, Tom told his father, until he uncovered an ancient Kalashnikov. Then he looked at the sky and shook his fist heavenwards. He thanked them for their help and turned to leave. Where was he going, they asked 'To Baghdad to kill Americans' he said. One young man's story – a metaphor for the tragedy, carnage and disaster that is Bush and Blair's Iraq.

Keys was originally going to run against the Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, but Roxy Music's Brian Eno was prepared to give moral, political, public, publicity backing to someone who might catch the imagination of the public against the Prime Minister. Key's hesitated for barely an hour. 'Why go for the monkey' he said, 'when you can go for the organ grinder, I'll do it for Tom. Win or lose, I can't bring him back, but I can walk down the path to his grave and tell him 'I gave it all I've got, son.'

It would be easy to say, this is a grief stricken man and his stand is not about politics, but pay back. No, it is about bringing back accountability and truth into politics, an attempt at restoring democracy', says Keys. He and his wife Sally, a former trauma and emergency nurse Manager, say if Tom and the now eighty seven British serving in Iraq had died from weapons of mass destruction the grief would be of one dimension, That 'they died for a lie' he says, including all coalition service personnel and Iraqis is why he stresses the truth -and accountability has an extra dimension. Given their medical background, the Keys have become listeners to much anger and pain. 'A father who slept by his son's grave every night; then died; the wife who had just two legs returned in her husband's coffin – they were different sizes. She was asked to identify which was her husband's.' One family, he says, had to bury their son twice. His remains, from a helicopter crash were returned to them. 'When the helicopter was returned to the US, investigators found further remains and sent them. they had to exhume the casket, add the remains and have a second funeral' Life is indeed cheap for all in Iraq it would seem. 'We have moved on from Iraq' says the Prime

Minister airily. Try telling that to countless families east and west. In a recent television programme Blair was asked how many British service people had died. He didn't know.

The extraordinary backing Reg Keys has received is across the board. Novelist Frederick Forsythe, appearing with Brian Eno and playwright David Hare on the BBC's usually sedate Radio 4 Breakfast programme – 3rd May – perhaps capped his fellow interviewees on Keys and the invasion by referring to the formerly independent Parliamentary Upper House, the House of Lords as now, appointed 'botty fondlers.' From killer quote to killer article, Rory Bremner, arguably one of the world's astutest political satirists, supported Keys with a piece headed – 'Like a fish, Labour is rotting from the head down. For the sake of David Kelly and Tom Keys it's time for a decapitation.' 4.

Richard Dawkins, distinguished Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, wrote Keys was 'following in Martin Bell's heroic heroic footsteps, but with a bigger target, Blair himself.' 5.

Martin Bell, renowned former BBC war correspondent, the 'man in the white suit', won as an Independent in a campaign lasting just 28 days, defeating the Tory incumbent Neil Hamilton on an anti-sleaze ticket two elections ago, he retired at the second term, but has thrown his weight firmly behind Keys, campaigning with him in Sedgefield, walking miles on a leg injured in the Balkans.

The people of Sedgefield seem to have offered the traditional northern welcome, noted for warmth and generosity. The north is known for down to earth no nonsense, celebrity means little, personalities mean all. Derek Cattell, a Labour Party Member for thirty years and a Member of the Executive Committee for Sedgefield, resigned to support Keys. The decision to go to war with Iraq, he said 'raised many questions regarding the honesty and integrity of' Blair's leadership. Bob Clay, campaign Manager and ten years a Labour MP, has also thrown his weight behind the Campaign, John Lansman, another thirty year supporter, likewise. One resident, formerly proud to live across the road from the PM, has Keys stickers covering his windows.

A Prime Minister who has taken the country to war in the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq, yet has never seen a shot fired in anger, may have a battle of a different kind on his own doorstep.

Oddly, in keeping with the last seven years there has been but one brief sighting of him in Sedgefield – he is expected to helicopter in for the count at around midnight on the 5th May.

'Dear Mrs Blair.'

Rose Gentle's son Gordon was nineteen when he was killed by a roadside bomb in Basra in June 2004. Had his vehicle been equipped with electronic signal jamming device, he might have been saved she says, claiming this was not the case and as in a host of other incidents, correct, potentially life saving equipment was not available. Angry as she is at whoever planted the bomb, her main fury is at the British government who sent troops not only she says, into 'an illegal war', but made, she claims, little effort to protect them. Gentle, whose first action after her son's death was to deliver a letter to the Prime Minister, accompanied by her equally articulate and feisty daughter Maxine, then fourteen and old beyond her years.

Her campaign has been relentless 'my son was used as a bit of meat' ,in a war not over wmd's but o-i-l. There are those who think Gentle ' .. should keep out of a debate that has the potential to bring down governments on both sides of the Atlantic.' 6. Far from it, is infact running as an Independent, in the election against Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram in Scotland's East Kilbride.

Had the Prime Minister or his wife heeded her requests, the government might have had one less embarrassing candidate to haunt them.

Gordon Gentle, known as 'the gentle giant' for his six ft frame, was unemployed, longed to be a mechanic and from a poverty stricken, proud area, Pollock, Glasgow. Seeking work, he went to an army recruiting centre in November 2003. The army moved in, knocked at the door, drove him to see videos. It was, he thought the way to get his driving licence and his trade. His family tried to dissuade him, but he was determined, he would return from Iraq, buy a car and have the means to find work. His dreams, like so many in the invasion died with his, when he was killed just weeks after the end of his training and two days before power was handed back to the 'democratically' elected government.

Tony Blair was on holiday and a letter of condolence arrived after seven weeks. In the interim they gained a meeting with the combative Deputy Prime Minister who enraged Gentle and Maxine so much, they walked out. 7 She wanted Tony Blair 'to come to Pollock and talk to the 'parents locally with sons still serving in Iraq 'perhaps then he would understand how unemployment and poverty' leads to bright young to sign up. He wouldn't come, she said. 8.

She made a video letter to Cherie Booth, Human Rights Barrister and wife of the Prime Minister, with the help of an independent group of filmmakers called the Camcorder Guerillas. Titled 'Dear Mrs Blair' it appealed for the troops to come home from an illegal war 'mother to mother'. The video had a public screening on a chill night in Glasgow in December and a copy delivered to Downing Street. It's plea fell on deaf ears.

On May 3rd, Gentle left the campaign trail for a day and travelled to London with nine other bereaved families and delivered another letter to Downing Street. A legal document drawn up by Phil Shiner of Public Interest Lawyers, who is also, ironically acting for Iraqi victims of coalition torture. The letter demands an immediate independent public enquiry into the legality of the law. The families will file for a judicial review if there is no response within fourteen days. The families and Reg Keys, part of Military Families Against the War are also lodging papers with the International Criminal Court in the Hague over the use of cluster bombs by British Forces.

On election eve, the case for war seems so thin, that according to the London Independent, one wife has claimed that her husband's insurance company has said he is no longer covered, since the war may be illegal. 9. 'Disclosed documents difficult to reconcile with declarations' is the heading regarding Shiner's letter in the Independent.

The government has one more shock to face. Paul Bigley whose extraordinary, relentless, lone fight for his brother Ken, kidnapped in Iraq last year, went round the world, has flown in to campaign with Murray, Keys and Gentle. On May 3rd, he wrote an open letter which was also published in the Independent. In the spirit of decency and conciliation, at his brother's memorial service in Liverpool Cathedral, he had apologized for his fight with the government, and said there was nothing personal, he had been trying to save his brother's

life.

In part it reads:

'I was about to take my leave , the Foreign Secretary pulled me to one side and whispered: " Oh by the way Paul, you have a rapport and good connections with the media. Do you think the next time you are on air you could mention this fact, re-iterate it, you know apologize because Mr Blair is rather concerned about his re-election chances.

Its my personal belief that Ken's body may be lying in a fridge in the US and we could be hearing an announcement shortly that they have succeeded in identifying him.

Recovering Ken's body at this time would be opportune for Blair and company, in the run up to the election it would provide a temporary distraction. People have short memories. I know we can't keep whinging on all the time because Ken has been put on the back burner, we accepted the inevitability of that.

If I am wrong and Ken was blown to pieces and there is no body in a fridge anywhere then I will apologize. But they are not going to try to use the body of my brother to distract from the real issue. '

It was one Eric Arthur Blair who wrote,

'political language ... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.'
10.

His pen name was George Orwell. What goes around, comes around, his namesake may be in for a rough ride.

Felicity Arbuthnot is a Global Research Contributing Editor. Her carefully documented reports from the Iraqi war theater not only have provided evidence of the war crimes committed by occupying forces, they reveal the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the plight of an entire nation and its people. In this report Felicity Arbuthnot examines the mood in Britain, where war criminal prime minister Tony Blair faces the possibility of defeat in his home riding.

Notes

1. Paul Routledge, New Statesman March 28th 2005. www.newstatesman.com

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Daily Mail, Friday April 24th 2005. Dr David Kelly was the government scientist and former weapons inspector found dead of an alleged suicide, after giving evidence to the Hutton Enquiry.

5. Independent, 23 April 2005. graciousness – Shayler and Annie charisma.

6. Susan Flockhart, Sunday Herald, 29th August 2004.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Independent, 4th May 2005.
10. George Orwell '1984.'

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