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Blair faces party revolt

British PM could lose majority for his support of U.S. war on Saddam

Mark F. Proudman

National Post

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"The old Tory party is completely finished."

Those were the words of the prominent Tory politician and philosopher Lord Bolingbroke in 1715, after the accession of George I.

But in politics, nothing is forever, and that old Tory party, in different guises, has as often as not ruled Great Britain for the past three centuries. Under leaders from William Pitt the Younger to Benjamin Disraeli to Winston Churchill to Anthony Eden to Margaret Thatcher, much of what we associate with Britain, for better or for worse, has been rooted in a party that was declared dead almost 300 years ago.

Today, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair is acting in the best of Tory traditions. He is facing down a foreign dictator -- Saddam Hussein -- and loyally supporting his U.S. ally, believing (quite correctly) that he is right to do so. But at the same time, many of his backbenchers are not happy. They have become ideologically anti-American, and the Labour party is seriously divided on the Iraqi issue.

More than 100 MPs -- a quarter of Blair's caucus -- have signed a petition against ousting Saddam. If there is war with Iraq, many MPs may cross the floor to the third party, the Liberal Democrats, who have been running to the left of Blair on many issues, including taxation and foreign policy. Blair's majority is so large -- 410 seats in a Parliament of 658 -- that he could afford to lose about 75 seats without putting his majority in doubt; but if Blair loses 100 MPs, it could be his undoing -- and the Tories' salvation. War will have been decided upon in Washington; its main casualty may yet be in London.

In Britain (unlike in Canada, where party discipline almost always trumps dissent) no force has been so dangerous to government front benches as their own backbenchers. It was the backbenchers that did in Peel and Gladstone in the 19th century, and Asquith and Thatcher in the 20th. Blair's own Labour Party was notorious for its unruly backbenchers during the Wilson governments of the 1960s and 1970s, and Blair may be about to follow in those distinguished footsteps.



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When Blair came to power in 1997, the death of the Tory party was announced yet again. The modern, friendly, all-too-smooth New Labour Prime Minister seemed to carry all before him. By contrast, the doings of the leaders of the Tory opposition, first William Hague and now Iain Duncan Smith, have attracted little attention. Blair successfully co-opted what had been the Tories' best issues -- free markets and a strong defence -- and he avoided the imputation of wing-nut leftism that had (not without reason) attached itself to Labour during the Thatcher years.

The very name of Blair's New Labour implied a distinction from, and an apology for, the old Labour Party that had been known for its dedication to less apologetic and more extreme forms of socialism and neutralism.

One of New Labour's strongest points has been the special Anglo-American relationship most recently cemented by the friendship of Blair with president Bill Clinton.

Though the Labour Party of Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin did much to create that post-war special relationship in the 1940s, there has always been a cleavage in the party over attitudes to the alliance in general and to the United States in particular, and past Labour leaders have contained it only with great difficulty. Many of the left-wing members of Parliament still do not like the American link, and they find that alliance particularly offensive when it connects them to George W. Bush and his southern fundamentalist, free-enterprise Republicans.

Blair had upset many of his staunchly socialist backbench supporters even before the possibility of war with Iraq became an issue. Throughout the years of the Conservative prime ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major, they sat dutifully on the backbenches, and now they are required dutifully to sit on the backbenches of a re-elected Labour government that appears, in their eyes, to be following many of the same policies as the detested Thatcher.

Blair has had better luck with the British public. So far, his Clinton-like embrace of the centre has worked brilliantly. The majority of the British public like markets -- at least as long as they work in their favour -- and the majority also like Americans. This latter fact was particularly evident in the British reaction to Sept. 11. Many Britons, like many Canadians, know Americans, or are related to Americans, or travel or work in the United States. Many may even want to live there. The large cultural grouping that Winston Churchill called the English-Speaking Peoples has often, in the past century, demonstrated a spontaneous cohesion, whatever its political divisions. As Churchill observed to the Russian leader Georgi Malenkov, we use our common language to do a great deal of arguing, but are not to be divided on fundamentals.

But those sentiments of attachment are weakening under two influences. The first is the fact that an increasing proportion of the British public consists of Third World and Islamic immigrants, and these people not only have fewer connections with the United States, many may even see it as an enemy. Like the Canadian Liberal party, the British Labour Party has successfully monopolized the votes of immigrants, and many party members mirror the hostility to the United States of these recent arrivals.

The second factor is a cultural and intellectual elite -- professors, artists, writers, journalists and intellectuals -- that is increasingly anti-American. The London Review of Books, a leading intellectual journal, has been consistently anti-American. In its first issue after Sept. 11, Mary Beard, a leading Cambridge academic, wrote that the Americans "had had it coming." There have been nutty professors around forever, but a certain critical mass of intellectual opinion is now portraying any support for American policy as somehow dumb or even evil. In order to appear sophisticated and open-minded in such circles, it is increasingly necessary to be simplistically anti-American.

These attitudes are reflected on the Labour benches. Like the intelligentsia of which they are a part, many Labour MPs and activists have spent much of their lives demonstrating against Americans, first (for those old enough) over the war in Vietnam, and then against the nuclear missile deployments in the 1980s. Never mind that the nuclear arms race was started by the Russians, and never mind that the Americans turned out to be right: We all have self-constructed narratives of identity, stories of who we are and of the past struggles that made us who we are, and the identities of many (possibly most) Labour MPs have been constructed around anti-American activism.

The Labour Party chairman, Charles Clarke, has found it necessary to engage in damage control by appealing for loyalty from the backbenches by saying that he too had been in the streets in the 1960s and again in the 1980s, and that while the Americans had, of course, been wrong back then they are (paradoxically, he implied) right to fight Islamic terror now.

There were rumblings of discontent on the Labour backbenches during the recent Afghan war, but a quick victory and the unattractiveness of the Taliban sufficed to keep it under control. Many see Iraq as a prostrate Third World country, and a war against it, especially one that went on for any length of time, could drive a large portion of Blair's parliamentary supporters into opposition. If, as expected, most defectors went to the soft-left Liberal Democrats, Blair might have to continue in office on the strength of Tory support for as long as the war lasted.

A leader can only ignore his core supporters' beliefs for so long. Sir Robert Peel, Tory Prime Minister in the 1840s, became convinced, on the strength of intellectual arguments about the benefits of free trade, that tariffs on imported wheat -- the notorious Corn Laws -- had to go. But most of his supporters were landowners who benefited nicely from the Corn Laws. It is the distinguishing glory of Sir Robert Peel that he disdained the fixed views of his agrarian supporters and broke up his party for an intellectual conviction. The bitterness of his former supporters was unappeasable; his party broke apart and was out of power, with the exception of brief interregna, for a generation.

Gladstone's Liberals had a similar experience a generation later over Ireland, and finally came to grief in the First World War. H.H. Asquith, Prime Minister at the beginning of that war, was a rationalist Victorian liberal, and was able, like Blair, to govern from the centre while commanding the support of the left. He saw no alternative to war with Germany in 1914, given Britain's commitments to Belgium and France. But he hated the war at heart, and when the pugnacious David Lloyd George rose in the House in

1915 to complain that Asquith "waged war without enthusiasm," even Asquith had to admit that Lloyd George had a point. Asquith resigned and was replaced by Lloyd George, who had earned himself the distrust of Liberals but the votes of Tories. A former radical with a pacifist reputation, Lloyd George led Britain through the second half of the First World War on the strength of Tory votes. The Liberal Party never recovered: Lloyd George was the last Liberal prime minister.

About once every 50 years for the past few centuries, British politics has been convulsed by the division of a major party. If Blair takes Britain into a war with Iraq, and faces trouble on his own benches, he may well end up like Lloyd George, with the loyalty of no one, and the temporary support of his former Conservative opponents. Like Peel and Lloyd George before him, Blair, if he abandons his party and governs with opposition support, may end up consigned by his own former supporters to that special circle of hell that Dante reserved for the apostate.

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