

WFO

Cherie Blair apologises but defiant

MW H9-15

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, DEC. 11. Cherie Blair, the beleaguered wife of the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has publicly apologised for dealing with a convicted conman who helped her negotiate the purchase of two flats recently, but she remained defiant in rejecting allegations of impropriety saying those who knew her would testify that she would 'never' misuse her position in any way.

In an unprecedented public display of emotions, which critics dismissed as a 'stunt', Mrs. Blair broke down in front of live TV cameras as she spoke of the pressures on her as a mother, wife and a high-profile barrister.

"I am not a Superwoman," she said adding, in an emotionally-cracked voice: "The reality of my life is that I am juggling a lot of balls in the air...some of the balls get dropped." And, then, more dramatically, she said: "Sometime I feel I would like to crawl away and hide. But I will not."

This is the first time that the wife of a British Prime Minister has been forced to make a public apology which shows just how seriously the row is viewed in Downing Street despite attempts to put up a brave face. Mr. Blair insisted that the sections of the media had blown it out of all proportions, and said he was 'proud' of his wife.

But the Opposition said the jury was still out on Mrs. Blair, and maintained that only an independent inquiry could clear the air. "Of course you feel sympathy for her...but we need to know that she has done absolutely nothing wrong.

Only an independent inquiry will establish this," said a senior Tory leader, David



The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair's wife, Cherie Blair, makes a statement to the press in London on Tuesday. — AFP

Davis, as Mrs. Blair's public ratings plummeted to a new low.

Mrs. Blair stuck to her denial that she was aware of the criminal background of Peter Foster, when she agreed to let him help her with the purchase of flats in Bristol two months ago. She said she knew him only as a friend of her fashion adviser and confidante Carole Caplin.

"Obviously if I had known full details of Mr. Foster's past I would not have allowed myself to get into this situation," she said. Mrs. Blair also rejected the allegation

that she tried to influence the case involving Mr. Foster's deportation to Australia where he is wanted in a fraud case. Apparently it is this allegation which forced her to break her silence because as a barrister this could damage her reputation and prospects.

She said she spoke to Foster's solicitors and checked out the name of the judge who is to hear his appeal against deportation in order to reassure Ms. Caplin that "normal process was being followed".

"I emphatically did not try influence this one way or another, I was simply trying to help my friend Carole find out the facts.... It is now being suggested tonight that because I publicly checked the available court list for the name of the judge I somehow acted improperly. I did not," she said.

Mrs. Blair said throughout the controversy her only concern was to "protect my family and to help my friend Carole..I am sorry if I have embarrassed anyone."

The apology climaxed ten days of nationwide media frenzy led by the rabidly anti-Blair Mail group of newspapers and supported by right-wing sections of the media such as *The Daily Telegraph* which maintained this morning that despite her bravura performance — "part wounded mother, part Clintonesque hairs-splitter" — Mrs Blair "failed to put herself above suspicion".

Mrs. Blair's apology is widely seen as a belated damage-limitation exercise but questions about her judgement remained. And the one question on everyone's mind was as to whether Mr. Blair himself was aware of his wife's dealings with a fraudster and if so, to what extent.

THE HINDU

1 2 DEC 2002

Fresh row over immigration

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, DEC 4. As a fresh row erupted over the continuing high level of immigration into Britain, the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, accused the far Right of trying to create a 'scare' by evoking apocalyptic visions of immigrants swamping the country.

Mr. Blunkett, though himself seen as a hardliner on the issue, reacted strongly when during a heated exchange in the Commons the Tories seized on the recent rise in asylum applications to warn of a 'disaster' if the Government did not get its act together — and fast.

His remarks that the Tories' attitude smacked of the scare tactics of the "far Right" were denounced as 'arrogant' and 'offensive' by Tory MPs who in-

sisted that the Government's immigration and asylum policy was in a shambles.

The clash followed the publication of new official figures showing a sharp increase in asylum applications, and Mr. Blunkett's announcement that Britain had agreed to accept up to 1,200 inmates of the Sangatte refugee camp in France when it closes down at the end of this month.

The decision was attacked by critics who said it would add to the pressures on an already 'creaking' immigration system.

"Why should 1,200 people be suddenly, at the wave of a Home Office wand, transformed from asylum seekers into work seekers granted permits ahead of others" asked one Opposition MP.

The shadow home secretary,

Oliver Letwin, the most moderate of Tory leaders, said unlawful immigration had reached 'record' levels and warned that if asylum applications continued to increase at the current rate "the present crisis will turn into a disaster".

Another moderate Tory leader, Francis Maude, said though there was a case for "selective and controlled economic migration" and for giving asylum to people genuinely fleeing persecution in their own countries, tough measures were needed to discourage bogus applicants.

Race and immigration groups, however, attacked attempts to 'demonise' immigrants and warned against a "return to Powellism" — a reference to Enoch Powell, the Tory leader who led a bitter racist campaign in the late sixties against unchecked immigration.

They said that far from being a burden, immigrants contributed to the British society with much of the service sector almost entirely dependent on them.

"Let us have a 48-hour strike of immigrants and their offspring and see what happens to this ungrateful nation without cleaners, doctors, lawyers, waiters, nannies, actors, ushers, curry cooks, bouncers, drivers, teachers.....," said Yasmin Alibhai Brown, a leading commentator on race issues.

Despite Tory criticism, the Blair Government is widely seen to have a tough line on asylum and Mr Blunkett himself has been accused of following a right-wing agenda on the issue.

5 DEC 2002

THE HINDU

Plot to attack London Underground foiled

18/11

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, Nov. 17. An alleged terrorist plot to launch a poison gas attack on the London Underground which could have caused mayhem, has been foiled, the police claimed today, adding to the growing public nervousness about their safety.

Three unemployed youths of North African origin, alleged to be linked to an Al-Qaeda group and carrying false passports, have been arrested under the anti-terrorism law but police admitted that no chemicals or bomb-making material had been found on them. Originally six men were rounded up after a series of raids on several suspicious addresses in London two weeks ago but three were released after questioning.

Significantly, nothing lethal was discovered during the raids. Intelligence agencies, however, were quoted as saying that they suspected the trio was behind a plot to release a chemical gas such as cyanide into a crowded train compartment at a rush hour in a replay of the 1995 deadly gas attack

on the Tokyo subway. It was also pointed out that the Al-Qaeda had a 'history' of experimenting with cyanide. Nearly three million commuters use the London Underground every day and experts said that there could be heavy casualties in the event of a toxic gas attack. "It could kill a large number of people in a confined place," one expert said. Apparently, the suspects — Rabah Kadris, Karim Kadouri and Rabat Chekat-Bals — had been under surveillance for sometime following intelligence reports that the 'gang' was planning to bring into Britain ingredients of a gas bomb ahead of a possible attack on the Underground.

It is believed that this might have led to a Home Office warning last week that Britain could be the target of a "dirty bomb" or "poison gas" attack. The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair's grim warning a few days ago of a very real threat to Britain's security is also understood to have been prompted by intelligence reports relating to the "Underground plot". The three men had already been arrested when Mr. Blair called for

utmost vigilance saying that the Government received new terror-related intelligence almost everyday. "The purpose of terrorism is not just to kill and maim. It is also to scare people, disrupt their normal lives, produce chaos and disorder", he warned even as he asked people not to panic.

Questions were being asked as to why the public was not warned of this specific threat instead of being fed on a daily diet of general warnings, and *The Sunday Times* which first disclosed the 'plot' in its early

editions pointed to a "growing split in Whitehall over counter-terror tactics". There was also some scepticism about how credible the 'plot' considering that nothing palpably incriminating had been found on the suspects.

The report of the 'plot', which sent the national media and television channels into overdrive, climaxed a week of terror warnings from British and U.S. intelligence agencies and the broadcast of yet another "bin Laden" tape by Al-Jazeera TV. Suggestions that the tape could be genuine have heightened western security concerns.

AFP reports: Meanwhile, Kuwaiti authorities have arrested a top Al-Qaeda member and foiled a plot by the terror group to blow up a hotel in Yemen housing Americans, a senior security source said. "It is true," the source told AFP when asked about reports in several Kuwaiti newspapers that the Emirate state security had uncovered a plot to attack a hotel in Yemen during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

'Osama in Yemen'

British special forces are searching for Osama bin Laden in Yemen after new intelligence surfaced, revealing that the Al-Qaeda leader fled Afghanistan last year and is being protected by tribesmen in his ancestral homeland. The focus of the world's biggest manhunt has dramatically shifted from Afghanistan and Pakistan's border areas to the lawless tribal region of Hadhra Maug in south-east Yemen. American officials said they had captured a high ranking Al-Qaeda official in the region, suggesting that the noose might be tightening around Osama.

Labour anti-war faction calls on PM to reject Iraq action

Hawkish Blair faces revolt

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ANDREW CAWTHORNE

Blackpool (England), Sept. 30 (Reuters): Prime Minister Tony Blair faced a revolt today from rebel members of his ruling Labour Party over London's hawkish, pro-American stance on Iraq.

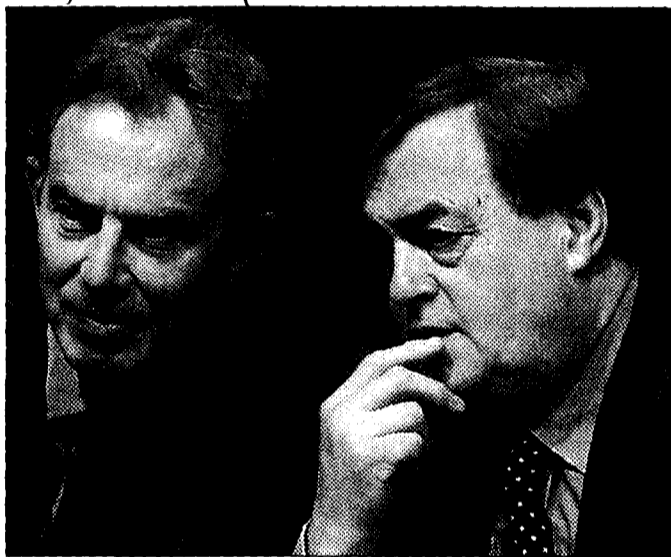
A motion put forward by the anti-war faction at Labour's annual conference in the northern seaside town of Blackpool challenged Blair "to reject armed action, and... not to support military intervention in Iraq".

While not expected to pass, the motion was nevertheless proving a focal point for a faction of Labour legislators upset at Blair's support for US President George W. Bush's build-up of pressure on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"It's come to something when the Labour leader takes the side of the most Right-wing Republican faction in the US," one of those legislators, George Galloway, said.

He and more than 50 other Labour members also voted against Blair in an emergency debate on Iraq in parliament last week and helped lead 150,000 people at a weekend peace rally in London.

Blair was set to hear out his critics, but made clear on the eve of the conference he would not



Prime Minister Tony Blair with his deputy John Prescott at the opening session of the Labour party conference at Blackpool, England. (AFP)

waver on Iraq. "I hope he (Saddam) can be forced by international pressure, but if not then we have to be prepared as an international community to force him to do it the other way," he said. He also won strong support from his powerful finance minister Gordon Brown, who was reported to have been troubled by the economic impact of potential conflict in the Gulf.

"The strongest message must

go out to Saddam Hussein from the international community that his actions cannot continue unchecked and with impunity," Brown said in a conference speech.

London and Washington are trying to push through a tough UN Security Council resolution threatening military action if Iraq does not renounce weapons of mass destruction.

Such a resolution would

make Blair's task of convincing Britons considerably easier. Polls show the majority oppose a US-led attack but would be supportive of UN-backed strikes.

The contentious Iraq motion at Blackpool directly contradicted Blair's recent dossier on Saddam's weapons capacity by noting "the view of most western experts... that little or no evidence exists to substantiate claims that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction."

In a reference calculated to sting stalwarts of the Centre-Left Labour Party, for whom South African leader Nelson Mandela is an icon, the motion also backed "the call from Nelson Mandela not to follow President Bush into a war".

In what one commentator called "an entire day of blood-letting," Blair also faced a rough ride on the domestic front. Angry Labour-affiliated unions were demanding an inquiry into the government's controversial policy of letting private firms build and run some key social services like hospitals.

A motion presented by the unions, who still wield heavy influence within the party structure, criticised the "expensive unaccountable privatised services delivered on the back of cuts to the pay and conditions of vulnerable workers."

Afghan illegals detained after raid on UK mosque

London, July 25 (Reuters): British police today raided a mosque where an Afghan family of illegal immigrants had taken refuge.

They entered the mosque near Stourbridge in the West Midlands in the early hours of the morning to remove Farid and Feriba Ahmadi and their two children. "Two people unlawfully at large in the UK have been detained prior to their removal from the UK," a home office spokesman said.

The couple were taken away and their children are now being looked after by family friends.

The family took refuge in the mosque after home office officials said they must go to Germany where their original asylum claim was made. In May, Britain tightened its immigration laws as figures showed it had received 19,520 asylum applications in the first quarter of the year and that 75 per cent were rejected. Nearly 3,000 failed asylum seekers were removed from the country in that time.

Stealing Camelot

British politicians are scrapping over the site of King Arthur's fa-



Afghan alien Feriba Ahmad looks pensive after being removed from a mosque in Lye, England, on Thursday. (AFP)

bled Camelot, making conflicting claims that the legendary monarch lived in their constituency.

Several MPs are caught up in the squabble, triggered by news that Oscar-winning film maker Steven Spielberg wants to pro-

duce a television mini-series about the Arthurian court.

"I have read the exaggerated and incorrect stories about Arthur with some interest..." Martyn Jones, MP for Clywd South in Wales, said in a statement to the House of Commons.

"So I decided to set the record straight in Parliament by refuting these spurious claims. Arthur's connections are with the Vale of Eborac — it's as simple as that," he said.

David Heath, who represents Somerton and Frome in southwest England, insisted on Arthur's supposed connections to his constituency, saying Somerset would be "an ideal location for filming".

Not to be outdone, Robert Key, the Member for Salisbury in southern England, "deplores any attempt to rewrite history". Arthur was, of course, linked to the Wessex region in which Salisbury stands.

There is actually no conclusive evidence that Arthur was British, or even a real historical figure, so Spielberg may choose to save on air fares and make the series in the States.

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H10-121

Blair warns IRA

25/7 ✓

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, JULY 24. The British Government today warned the IRA and other sectarian paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland that it would not tolerate any more breaches of the ceasefire, and those who persisted in instigating violence would face the "full force of the law".

In what was seen as a pointed reference to the IRA, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said that henceforth even preparation for violence such as acquisition of weapons and training would be regarded as a breach of ceasefire and dealt with a firm hand. There would be no 'acceptable' or 'tolerated' levels of violence, and the assessment of whether a group was observing the terms of the Good Friday agreement would become more rigorous over time.

Mr. Blair's warning in the Commons on Wednesday came amid fresh concerns over the future of the peace process following renewed violence in Belfast recent weeks. He resisted pressure from Unionists to announce action against IRA and Sinn Fein but made clear that Republicans must do more to inspire confidence in their commitment to the peace process.

Ahead of his statement, the Unionists threatened to expel Sinn Fein, the political arm of IRA, from Northern Ireland's coalition government for its

'failure' to rein in the IRA. They accused the IRA of re-engaging in violence and secretly re-arming itself while claiming to be committed to the peace process. The Prime Minister was seen to have had this in mind when he warned paramilitaries against engaging in "training, targeting, and acquisition of weapons".

The Sinn Fein leader, Gerry Adams, however, blamed loyalist paramilitary groups for the latest burst of violence that, in the past one week, has resulted in a series of clashes and the death of a Catholic youth in Belfast. "The reality is that Catholics are being killed in Belfast and there is a planned, organised campaign by loyalists against Catholics," he said. It was

wrong, he added, to 'focus' on IRA when loyalist groups were on a "killings spree".

Caught up between competing pressures, Mr. Blair called on all sides to put an end to the cycle of violence. Immediately afterwards, the Northern Ireland Secretary, John Reid, warned that if the violence was not stopped Northern Ireland could return to the darkest days of the Troubles. The Unionists were not satisfied with the Government's response which, they said, did not meet their concerns about IRA's activities. The Sinn Fein warned that it would oppose any attempt by Unionists to throw them out of the Government. They said they would respond to such threats in a "very critical way".

Fighting fascism

Far Right wins municipal polls in Britain

The extremist, anti-immigrant British National Party (BNP) shocked Britain's political establishment recently when it won its first council seat in nine years in the municipal polls. The BNP like most fascist parties sees itself as a patriotic, nationalist party, which considers Britain the rightful home only of whites of Anglo-Saxon origins, and does not accept the new multi-cultural face of British society. After the railings of Enoch Powell in the seventies when he demanded that immigration be stopped and British blacks and Asians be repatriated to the land of their origin, no real far-right leader had emerged until the current BNP chief Nick Griffin. However the urbane, Oxford-educated Griffin has been cleverer than Powell in that as a temporary tactic he has tried to co-opt communities across the colour barrier. He has declared that the BNP is only against "minority Muslims", hoping to divide what was once the monolith British Asian community. The strategy is insidious in that it hopes to persuade the British Sikhs and Hindus to lead the fight against the subcontinental Muslim and break Asian solidarity.

The recent electoral success of the BNP has been in the rundown northern town of Burnley, which is still simmering from the race riots of last summer. Inhabited by a large community of Muslims who originate from both Pakistan and India, Griffin's party launched a hate campaign last year in which they accused the government of pampering the Asian areas and ignoring white ghettos. A BNP meeting there sparked off the race riots. There are many parallels, which can be drawn between the BNP and the Sangh Parivar. The BNP's win completes an arc of far right politics emerging across Europe, which grows from Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands to Le Pen in France. While the BNP's success in numerical terms may be very small — only three seats out of a total of the 6,000 up for grabs across England — the other political parties are seeing the win as a significant warning shot. Fascists need to be beaten back wherever they appear — and that includes the indigenous brand that have taken hold in Gujarat.

THE STATESMAN

20 MAY 2002

Anti-BNP protests across Britain

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, MAY 4. Anti-racist activists protested across Britain today, a day after the hard-right British National Party (BNP) won three seats in the Asian-dominated town of Burnley.

in local elections despite a determined bid by major political parties to stop it.

Demonstrations were held in several racially-sensitive areas, including Burnley, even as the Labour leader of the Burnley council, Stuart Caddy, said he would not work with the three newly-elected BNP councillors calling them 'fascists' and their election a 'disaster'. The Labour chairman, Charles Clarke, accused the BNP of "tearing apart" the communities on racist lines, while his namesake and author of a report in last summer's race riots in Burnley and other towns, Lord Clarke, denounced BNP's "all-white Britain" campaign as "insidious and disgraceful".

Feelings ran high as the Anti-Nazi League members marched through city centres

carrying banners which said: "Shut down the BNP" and "Stop the Nazis". But no incident was reported until late in the afternoon, though the police were keeping their fingers crossed. A League spokesperson, Claire Dissington, said the BNP's successes had sent "a wave of horror across Britain".

"When they achieve council seats they begin to put on a veneer of respectability," she said pointing out that even though the party had won only three out of the 68 seats it contested the warning signals could not be ignored.

The sight of the BNP leader, Nick Griffin, going about Burnley showing a 'V' sign and insisting that immigrants should go back 'home' infuriated local residents even as political observers were surprised at the level of support for the BNP among middle-class whites who are not the "usual suspects".

Normally, the party has drawn backing from working class whites who have tended to accuse immigrants of 'sponging' on resources that, they believe, should have ben-

efited them. But this time white collar traditional Tory voters stood up for BNP, though many said they were simply protesting against mainstream politics and not necessarily endorsing BNP's racist agenda. Some said they were angry over high council tax, which the BNP had promised to bring it down.

But many also echoed BNP's line that the Government was 'pampering' immigrant communities and that the money that should have been spent on developing the whole region was 'going' to immigrants.

"I don't want these people here," one woman said pointing to immigrant homes. As political parties struggled to survey the 'damage', there was also a sense that they were over-reacting to the BNP's performance and comparisons with Jean-Marie Le Pen were misplaced.

"It is a panic reaction," one commentator said but warned that if real issues were not addressed things could be a lot more 'awful' next time around.

THE HINDU

5 MAY 2002

Alarm in U.K. over BNP poll gains

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, MAY 3. The far-right British National Party (BNP) set alarm bells ringing today by winning three seats in the racially sensitive immigrant town of Burnley in Thursday's nationwide council elections which threw up mixed results with all the three main parties — Labour, Tories and Liberal Democrats — claiming satisfaction.

The last time the BNP won a seat in any election was nine years ago and the revival of its fortunes, however modest, is seen as a sign of worsening race relations on the one hand, and the increasing disenchantment with mainstream political parties on the other. It is significant that one of the BNP winners, Carol Hughes, is a former Labour supporter. In her election leaflets she described herself as a 'committed' Labourite who had become "totally disillusioned" with the party as it had stopped 'listening' to the people.

"I am not a racist. I work with members of ethnic minorities. I just think it's time Burnley Council started listening to the people of Burnley," the 38-year-old car fac-

tory worker said. Burnley witnessed some of the decade's worst race riots last year, and the fact that the BNP was able to pick up three seats despite a concerted effort by mainstream parties to stop it confirmed the continuing racial polarisation in this former mill town where unemployment is high both among whites and Asians.

In the adjacent Oldham, which was also rocked by racial violence last summer, the BNP put up a strong performance coming very close to winning one seat, and getting second position in three wards.

An 18 per cent overall vote for a party which was unitedly opposed by the entire political establishment was regarded as a disturbing trend, though Labour tried to play down its significance with the party's MP for Burnley, Peter Pike, saying people had been 'conned' into voting for BNP.

"I do not believe at the end of the day that everyone who voted for the BNP in Burnley is racist. I believe people have been conned by the BNP and their racist candidates and leaders.

We have got to analyse the final results," he said but less complacent Labour watch-

ers warned against the "Le Pen effect" taking a hold on British politics. A buoyant Nick Griffin, the Cambridge-educated BNP leader, hailed his party's performance as a 'triumph' and said it would continue to push for an "all-white Britain".

This was tough talk after a campaign during which he tried to soften his party's image in order to broaden its appeal, and commentators warned that mainstream parties would need to go beyond rhetoric if they were really serious about "France happening in Britain". The contest for 6,000 council seats across England was the first major electoral exercise after last year's general elections and, barring an upsurge in BNP's fortunes, there was no significant shift in mood.

Tories improved their position marginally but failed to achieve a much-expected breakthrough under their new leader, Ian Duncan Smith. The party's former chairman, Michael Ancram, called it a 'workmanlike' performance. Labour did better than was expected even as it lost some of its strongholds; and Liberal Democrats remained on course as a rising 'third force'.

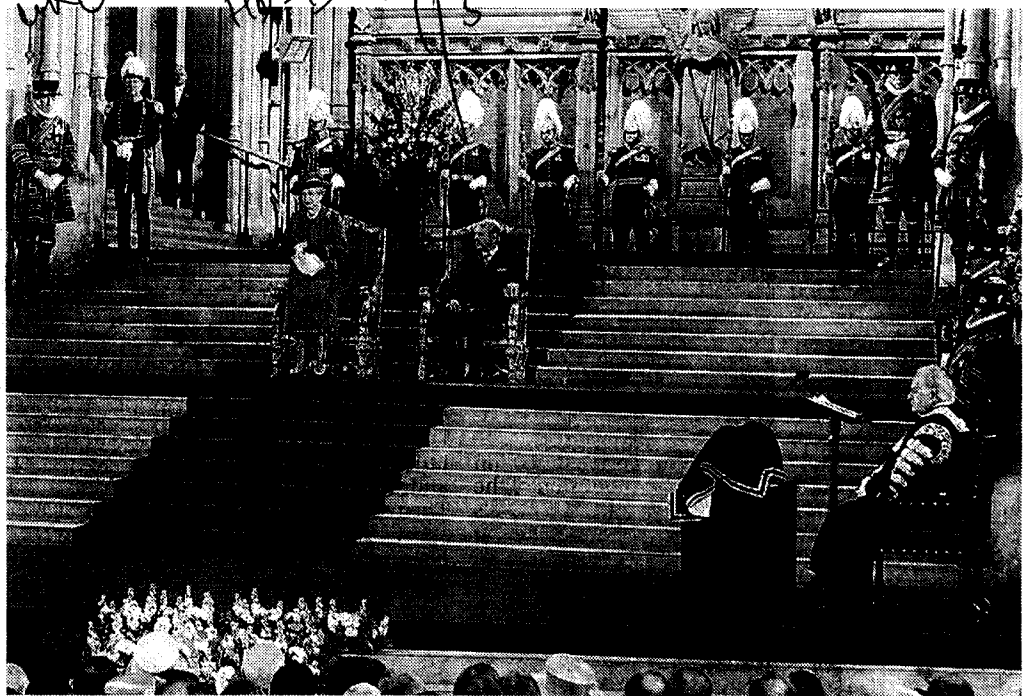
I will not step aside, says queen

LONDON, APRIL 30. Britain's Queen Elizabeth sent a clear signal today that she does not intend to step aside for her son Prince Charles and, in her 50th year on the throne, praised her country's multicultural tolerance in changing times. Addressing both Houses of Parliament — the first major public event of her Golden Jubilee year — the queen said she intended to remain on the throne to help Britain prosper.

"I would like above all to declare my resolve to continue, with the support of my family, to serve the people of this great nation of ours to the best of my ability," the turquoise-suited monarch told politicians and peers in Parliament's cavernous Westminster Hall. Since the death of the queen's mother last month, some commentators have suggested the 76-year-old monarch should step down, something she has never shown any inclination to do.

Prince Charles, already 53, could still be many years from becoming king in a family noted for its longevity. The Queen Mother, propelled to the throne with King George VI in 1936 after the abdication of his brother, always rejected the idea that monarchs could willingly give up their birthright.

Addressing more than 1,500 people in the medieval hall where her mother's body recently lay in state, the queen said the development of a "richly multicultural" society had been one of the major changes of her reign. "We...take pride in our tradition of fairness and tolerance. The consolidation of



Queen Elizabeth II addresses members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords in Westminster Hall, London, on Monday. — AFP

our richly multicultural and multifaith society, a major development since 1952, is being achieved remarkably peacefully and with much goodwill," she said.

Fears of a new extremism have engulfed Europe since far right leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, shocked France by winning through to a run-off in the country's Presidential election. Britain has its own local elections this week. The extremist British National Party could gain a toe-hold in some deprived pockets although it is no-

where near as prominent as Le Pen's party.

The queen said Britain and the royal family must continue to evolve. "Change has become a constant. The way we embrace it defines our future," she said, noting that her reign had encompassed the birth of the Commonwealth and European Union, the end of the Cold War and now the threat of international terrorism.

The queen was preceded into the hall by red-coated Beefeaters with white ruffs around their necks, carrying pikestaffs. They

were followed by the queen's Body Guard, red uniformed with white feather plumes sprouting from their helmets, marching slowly in time.

Eight, gold braided trumpeters heralded her arrival, standing in front of the hall's stained glass window.

But the queen said Britain could not live in the past and had nothing to fear from the future.

"We are a moderate, pragmatic people, more comfortable with practice than theory," she said— Reuters

THE HINDU

1 MAY 2002

Blair under pressure to probe vaccine row

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, APRIL 15. The Blair Government is under pressure to order a full inquiry into allegations that it favoured a drug company owned by a Labour donor by awarding it a £32-million contract to supply small vaccines to the National Health Service, without giving other companies a chance to bid.

The pressure intensified after experts contradicted official claims that the Labour benefactor, Paul Drayson's Powderject Pharmaceuticals alone had the expertise to supply the particular strain of vaccine it needs. It also emerged that Mr Drayson headed a taskforce which advised the Government on the need to stockpile smallpox vaccine to meet any threat of a bioterrorism attack.

The Government claim that Lister vaccine produced by Powderject offered the best protection against such an attack was dismissed as "utterly fallacious" by experts who pointed out that the U.S. had chosen a very different strain Dryvax — and it was in fact a British firm which was supplying it to the Americans. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has apparently said that both strains are equally effective.

A leading British scientist, Prof. John Oxford of the Royal London School of Medicine said there was "no medical reason" to prefer one strain over another though he acknowledged that Lister had been traditionally used in Britain. The

Tory vice-chairman, Tim Collins, demanded an independent inquiry into the manner in which the contract was awarded saying: "There are some very serious questions about how the process has been conducted." He also called for a cross-party group to supervise party donations to ensure transparency.

Mr Drayson donated £50,000 to the Labour Party last year, a few months after winning a £17-million Government order for anti-TB vaccines.

Mr Collins wanted to know whether the fact that a Labour donor had benefited from Government patronage was simply yet "another coincidence in a long chain of coincidences after Mittal, Enron and Formula One" — all of which had one thing in common: the donor being rewarded with a good turn from the Government. A Liberal Democrat MP, Norman Baker, who became famous after he brought the Hinduja's passport affair out in the open, blamed the recurring sleaze rows on "endemic secrecy" in the way the Government functioned.

There was further embarrassment for the Government over its links with big business after a Sunday newspaper reported that the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, lobbied with the Czech Government on behalf of BAe Systems which is negotiating a lucrative arms deal with Prague. The BAe Systems has donated money to the Labour Party and is believed to have close links with it.

16 APR 2007

THE HINDU

Revolt against Blair brewing

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, MARCH 25. Speculation over a simmering revolt among Labour MPs has reached a fever pitch amid reports of secret moves to challenge the leadership of the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who is seen to have become too "presidential", and out of touch with public and party mood.

His "blind" support to America over Iraq and growing proximity to the more right-wing European leaders such as Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and Spain's Jose Maria Aznar have infuriated even moderate Labour backbenchers and many of them have publicly voiced their disenchantment accusing Downing Street of operating on a "parallel planet".

The moves to unseat him may not get far but analysts said the very talk of a "plot" and the fact that it had not been denied was bad news for Mr. Blair whose public ratings plummeted to an all-time low this week.

According to an opinion poll this morning, a majority of vot-

ers are disappointed with his policies and 43 per cent would want him to step down at the next general election. *The Sunday Times* poll confirmed the findings of a Guardian survey earlier this week that Labour was rapidly losing its lead over the Tories. It is now only seven points ahead of Tories, and is backed by 40 per cent of the voters as against the 33 per cent support enjoyed by Tories. This is the sharpest drop in Labour's ratings since it returned to power last summer with a massive majority.

The "plot" to topple Mr Blair is reported to have the backing of not just the "usual suspects" but also of moderate party MPs and the idea, it is stated, is to get a "stalking horse" - a moderate MP with no personal ambitions - to challenge Mr. Blair's leadership triggering a chain of events that might lead to his fall. He could then be replaced by the Chancellor Gordon Brown, seen as a "natural" successor to Mr. Blair anyway.

The media-savvy chairman of

the Labour Party, Charles Clarke, is believed to be another contender and an unnamed party MP, backing him, was quoted in *The Sunday Times* today as claiming that "we have already begun plotting". The newspaper said that "conspirators" had already held meetings in the past fortnight to discuss the anti-Blair plot. A Left-wing party MP, Jeremy Corbyn, confirmed the "stalking horse" theory but said no names had emerged.

There is a precedent for a "stalking horse" plot. In 1989, a moderate Tory MP challenged Margaret Thatcher when she was Prime Minister and though he suffered a humiliating defeat he triggered a chain reaction which consumed Mrs Thatcher a year later. *The Guardian* on Saturday claimed that one MP was believed to be willing to play the "stalking horse" but would not name him except that he was believed to be "someone with no ambition and no enemies within the party."

THE HINDU

26 MAR 2002

Blair Govt. accused of academic censorship

By Hasan Suroor

LONDON, FEB. 23. The Blair Government has been accused of trying to "suppress" academic freedom by proposing to bring a range of areas of scientific research under official scrutiny on grounds of national security.

Under a new legislation, now before the House of Lords, academics would need to seek clearance from the Government before publishing a "sensitive" research work, or appointing foreign scholars to work in an area regarded as a potential security risk. In what is seen as a move towards unprecedented expansion of Government control over academic research, the bill empowers it to preview communication between researchers engaged in security-prone areas, and to vet foreign scholars wanting to work in British laboratories.

What the bill does is to extend the provisions of Britain's Export Control Act - intended to regulate arms trading - to scientific ideas and concepts whose "export" might lead to production of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. The intention is to control ideas or information which could be put to "dual use", and it follows calls to strengthen the original Act which was found to lack enough safeguards to make sure that "dual use" items were not exported.

Angry academics across Britain have denounced the move as "censorship by other means", saying it has serious implications for academic freedom. The Universities UK (UUK), which represents university vice-chancellors and principals, has said it would be curtail the basic academic freedom to publish new research, and jeopardise international collaborations. "Academics consider the option of publishing new research to be a basic freedom, and there is a fear that the new Bill will infringe this

freedom," a UUK spokesman said, demanding an amendment to the bill to safeguard bona fide research.

Widely respected academics such as Ross Anderson of the Security Research Group at Cambridge University have ridiculed the move to club exchange of academic ideas with export of arms. Dr Anderson made a distinction between a patent and a research paper saying while the former could be suppressed for defence reasons, there was no justification for suppressing scientific papers. A spokesman for Save British Science, a pressure group, said it was "ironic" that a Government which claimed to be in favour of freedom of information was now trying to curtail academic freedom.

Experts said there were so many areas of scientific research, particularly in medicine, which could lead to "dual uses" that entire disciplines would come under Government control. They were not convinced by official claims that "basic scientific research" would be exempted. The problem, they argued, was that the definition of what compromised "basic" research would be determined by the Government requiring academics to be constantly looking over their shoulders.

However, the Department of Trade and Industry, which is piloting the bill, has refuted allegations of academic "terrorism" and said the controls would apply only when the Government knew that certain information was or might be intended for use in the creation of weapons of mass destruction. "We cannot see how any organisation can seriously say the Government should not have the power to control exports who might assist in acts of, for example, terrorism," a spokesman told *The Independent* which first broke the story.

THE HINDU

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UK asks China for airbase

The Times, London

LONDON/WASHINGTON, Jan. 31. - Britain has approached China in its quest to find longer-term airbases in the region close to Afghanistan for future deployments of troops, supplies and humanitarian aid.

In an unprecedented move, British officials have spoken to Beijing about the possibility of using a Chinese base. "The Chinese did not turn us down," a ministry of defence official said

yesterday.

If approval is given, it would be the first time that British military aircraft have flown into China for operational reasons since the war against Japan in the 1940s.

British aircraft used to fly from Burma "over the hump" - as the border mountain range was referred to - into western China to refuel. But even then there was no British base in China.

The Chinese option for operations in Afghanistan was re-

vealed by British officials who outlined Britain's plans for establishing a network of "forward mounting bases" around Afghanistan. Other options include Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The two available airbases in Afghanistan, Kabul international airport and Bagram airfield, are being so over-used that the runways are crumbling. The British-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) is having to fly in cement to fill up the cracks.

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