

Bad Omens for Britannia: The Fates Gang Up

by Alan Clayton

The imagery up and down the British islands, of huge burnings to destroy the carcasses of slaughtered animals, really represent a funeral pyre for the British state, suggested one journalist. What with the hoof-and-mouth (HMD) disease spreading, debilitating snow storms, a third train wreck within 18 months, and the health service falling apart, an almost apocalyptic public mood has surfaced.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's carefully crafted plans for early Spring general elections might yet have to be postponed, if the quarantine travel restrictions and possible rail schedule cancellations are put in place. Blair himself puts on his best toffee apple smile and goes ahead as if nothing is wrong, like Nero, fiddling while Rome burns.

"Tony Blair, it goes without saying, is a master of the art of dissimulation. Our Anthony has a picture of Britain in his head that must on no account be sullied by contact with grubby reality. His is a land that is variously young, modern, inclusive, cool, decent, fair, progressive-but-with-traditional-values, and full, as best he can tell, of people just like him. How could it be otherwise? He was elected," wrote Scottish journalist Ian Bell in the March 4 Scottish *Sunday Herald*.

Demise of the Nation

Yet, grubby reality is the essence of what the dying Windsor state is, this second March of the new millennium.

The Health Service is coming apart at the seams. The Beatson Institute in Glasgow, for example, once one of the world's top treatment and research centers for cancer, is now not much better than a slum. One of the world's leading cancer experts, Prof. Karol Sikora, formerly the chief of the World Health Organization cancer control program and professor of clinical oncology at London's Hammersmith hospital, was offered the position of Chair of Oncology at Beatson, but declined the prestigious appointment because of what he saw as "chronic under-investment." Beatson's Oncology department treats half the cancer patients in Scotland, and last year a study found that patients were dying while waiting for treatment. A shortage of radiotherapy equipment has also resulted in patients being sent to private facilities elsewhere.

The horror of the hoof-and-mouth epidemic continues. Experts argue that the mass slaughter of healthy animals is a "medieval" approach to the problem. HMD, in fact, represents no danger to human health, and the "over the top" approach

by the Blair government, which is reacting as though it were dealing with the Black Death, is not a result of a priority of public health, but to give an international image of competence in crisis management.

The crisis is already reaching the supermarkets. The price of some meats on butchers' shelves has doubled because of the outbreak—and more price rises and shortages are likely to come, as supplies of British beef, lamb, and pork have been virtually halted because of the restrictions on animal movements. Other foods are becoming more expensive, as demand for chicken and other meats also increases. At one butchershop in Edinburgh, for example, the price of lamb has gone up by 50%, chicken has increased by 10%, and bacon by 100%. The cost of chicken is expected to rise even further. The biggest fear, though, is that panic buying—as happened during the recent fuel crisis—will greatly exacerbate the problem. There is already evidence that people are stocking up, with supermarkets reporting a 20% rise in meat sales in the past few days.

Modern farming is so intensive, so dependent on maximum use of investment, land, and raw materials, that it cannot tolerate the inefficiencies of temporarily sick animals, producing less milk and less meat. Second, food distribution is so integrated throughout Europe that a disease which, in the 1960s, could be confined to a limited area, will now spread in days. An HMD outbreak is thus a doubly ironic comment on modern farm-marketing methods, which increase the risks that disease will spread, while ensuring that what was once a setback for farmers is now a catastrophe. This is particularly true since the deregulation of agriculture introduced under former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Cows are now fed on ground animal remains as a cheap source of protein. More animals are reared more intensively on fewer farms. It was the deregulation of laws governing sterilization of animal feed under Thatcher which led to the survival of prions in the feed and the consequent spread of the deadly bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), more commonly known as "Mad Cow" disease.

Yet, rather than attack the cause of the crisis—policies of deregulation, free trade, and globalization—there is a tendency toward overblown "panic" about modern agriculture and industry. According to London *Times* commentator Mick Hume on March 5, this tendency is typified by Prime Minister Tony Blair's recent gatherings with environmentalists, where he has been pushing the idea that "global warming" is the result of modern industrial society, and is to blame for Britain's recent floods and outbreaks of disease among animals. Hume said that Britain is in the middle of a "national nervous breakdown."

Privatization of our rail system has also led to multiple disasters. A huge train wreck occurred on the island at the end of February—the third such rail catastrophe in 18 months. Although not on this occasion the fault of Railtrack, or any of the railway companies, the wreck has had a devastating effect

on public opinion, because it is a consequence of three unlikely events occurring at the same time, leaving the widespread feeling that the Fates themselves are against Britain.

The accident happened when a vehicle pulling a car on a trailer skidded off the M26 motorway near Selby in Yorkshire, and went down onto the track at the very time that the Newcastle-to-London express was approaching. The train struck the obstruction on the track and derailed. Just at this moment, a heavy coal-carrying freight train was approaching from the other direction; the two collided, with devastating effect. The exact death toll from this tragic accident is still unknown, and 33 of the 70 people injured in the crash were still in a hospital a week later.

Blair's Budget: Tax Cuts, Too

Blair's New Labour party still hopes to rescue the situation in early March, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, presents what has been described as a "give-away" budget. Various independent experts suggest that Brown will widen the 10% tax band to around £2,000—a move that will cost £1.5 billion a year in lost revenue, but will be of great benefit to middle-income families, whose electoral support New Labour depends upon. But, while the pre-election handout to middle Britain will be stealthy, the government will trumpet a range of measures designed to appeal to Labour's so-called "heartland voters." Brown will provide confirmation that the new children's tax credit will be worth at least £10 a week for low-income families—not the £8.50 originally announced. The other tax allowance aimed at below-average earners, the working families tax credit, is also likely to be significantly up-rated.

An increase in pensioners' Winter fuel payment to £200 is widely expected to accompany the increase in the basic state benefit for the elderly of £5 for a single pensioner and £8 for a couple. The government will announce a substantial increase in the minimum wage, from £3.70 an hour to around £4.10, to complete the boost for the poorly paid. Families with young children will also benefit from new measures to increase maternity pay and introduce state-sponsored paternity leave for new fathers.

However, Brown is anxious not to alienate business in the run-up to the election, and a large section of the new budget is expected to be devoted to addressing concerns over the business tax burden and red tape. He will announce moves to boost employee share ownership schemes for smaller firms, while larger companies will be able to benefit from new research and development tax credits.

Spring Elections Are Now in Doubt

Blair has booked millions of pounds worth of advertising for a general election in April or May, bookings that will entail huge penalty payments if cancelled, so there will be enormous pressure on him to proceed as planned. Ironically, the man is hung by his own petard, as they say. Blair launched



Prince Charles. Hoof-and-mouth disease has been found on his estate in Wales, after he boasted that the disease was the result of scientific, non-organic agriculture.

a "don't lose by default" election strategy to reverse the stay-at-home tendency which has emerged in New Labour voters. Yet, to project crisis management *savoir faire* in the face of the HMD epidemic, he has imposed huge travel restrictions throughout the island. Forest walks and cross-country paths, mountain climbing and hill walking, have now all been banned under pain of a \$7,000 fine, giving the widespread impression that the cure is worse than the disease. The island currently has a feeling of being under siege. Indeed, the election may be cancelled, because everyone will have to stay home! There is a widespread and tangible feeling, however, that, politically, the Tories of "Maggoty" Thatcher's fame do not offer a viable alternative to Blair, whose wrecking job could not be more apparent. Apathy runs high, and the possibility of a low turnout, were the election to take place, will certainly guarantee a future government lacking in any credibility.

Blair also is facing trouble brewing over his former colleague and architect of the New Labour "Third Way," Peter Mandelson, who was sacked over a "passports for sale" scandal a few weeks ago. Mandelson, whose personal proclivities are known not to be for the opposite gender, has bitter enemies within the New Labour hierarchy, particularly Chancellor of the Exchequer Brown, who is utterly determined that "Randy Mandy" not return to the top echelon of the party.