

Firefighters' Strike in Britain Threatens Government's Survival

by Alan Clayton

Britain is once again facing the combination of political, economic, industrial, and constitutional crises that brought down the Labour government of James Callaghan in March 1979 and swept the Conservative Party's Margaret Thatcher into power. At that time, the Labour government had lost control of major industrial unrest throughout the country. Industrial and domestic waste had piled up everywhere; there had been a huge strike of firefighters the year previously; and what was perceived as the worst of all, a grave-diggers strike had resulted in thousands of dead bodies piling up in morgues, and the government had to consider national emergency, making arrangements for mass cremation.

A highly divisive referendum on constitutional change in Scotland resulted in a vote of no-confidence in the government in the House of Commons, in which the Scottish National Party (SNP) voted with the Tories. The vote succeeded by a very narrow majority, forcing Callaghan to "go to the Palace" with his resignation, and the subsequent general election brought Margaret Thatcher into office with a huge majority.

The difference between then and now, of course, is that then the Tories had a credible leader in Margaret Thatcher, while that is manifestly not the case today with Ian Duncan Smith. In addition to that, and even more important, is that New Labour now occupies the privatizing, anti-trades-union political ground of Margaret Thatcher, and the Tories simply have nowhere to go. Their economic and foreign policy ground has been captured, and they are homeless. As the prominent political commentator Andrew Marr said, "Margaret Thatcher now wears trousers."

There is no gainsaying the fact that Prime Minister Tony Blair is struggling for survival; a damning poll showed 77% were dissatisfied with the government's handling of the labor dispute with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). The poll came on the day that Blair and Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown both delivered defiant messages to the unions that they would never sanction a pay deal which put the economy at risk. The Chancellor, speaking to the Confederation of British Industry, said there would be no return to the "bad old inflationary days of the mid-1970s and late-1980s," when "inflationary and unaffordable" pay settlements undermined economic stability. This hardening of the government's position

provoked a furious reaction from the FBU, and washed away any lingering hopes the dispute could be resolved before Christmas. Blair's statement was greeted with derision by firefighters across Britain.

However, the tensions within New Labour itself are now approaching breaking point, as Blair is being accused of a complete lack of judgment in putting the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott in charge of the firefighters dispute. Three times during his press conference of Nov. 25, Blair was invited to defend the record of his deputy, and three times he conveniently ducked mentioning his colleague's name. Charlie Whelan, a former senior adviser to Gordon Brown, issued a press statement, saying that "John Prescott is a complete buffoon, and it beggars belief that he is in charge of one of the most serious industrial disputes for years."

Whelan was referring to an article in the *News of the World*, which quoted Prescott suggesting a 16% pay raise was "worth talking about," when everyone else in the government, especially the Chancellor, was saying the complete opposite. Downing Street (the Prime Minister's office) has tried to present the difference as a Prescott-Brown good cop-bad cop routine.

Political observers of the Brown-Blair marriage, will also have noticed that the Prime Minister was more than happy to praise his Chancellor's contribution to the ongoing fire dispute. Yet again we are being reminded that when they work together, the two giants of New Labour are as lethal as any of Mario Puzo's Mafiosi. Blair is, however, breathing a sigh of relief that the Labour majority in the Scottish Parliament is so far holding to his line and resisting demands for a separate settlement with the firefighters union in Scotland, as there has recently been with the teachers union. But, with elections to the Scottish Parliament due in May, a weather eye is being kept on events "north of the border," as Labour losses in Scotland could open the way for an SNP administration there, and create further strains on the fragile unity of the United Kingdom.

More Shoals Ahead

Equally dangerous waters are being entered in the area of foreign policy and the absolute priority of maintaining the "special relationship" with the United States, a relation-

ship on which Britain's role as a "world power" increasingly depends. Chief of Defense Staff Adm. Sir Michael Boyce, a former Cold War-era submariner who never fired a torpedo in anger, released a salvo apparently calculated to explode in the government's face. Boyce's timing and aim were faultless. The occasion was a press briefing on the NATO summit, where he appeared with Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon. Hoon's face took on the crumpled look of his suit, as Boyce, all smart braid and buttons, revealed his exasperation with the handling of the firefighters' dispute. He complained that military morale had plummeted and training had been disrupted by having troops replace the firefighters, with their own obsolete fire trucks known as Green Goddesses. "Clearly, we don't have a box of 19,000 people standing by to be called upon to do firefighting duties," he said. As Hoon slumped in despair, the former First Sea Lord continued, "They must be drawn from operational units . . . and they have been standing by since September when they started training for their duties."

Boyce moved in for the killer blow: "Our troops are ill-equipped for another Gulf conflict; there has been no home leave for troops returning from Bosnia and Afghanistan and our ships, air stations, and battalions are vastly under strength."

The admiral's strike landed in the next day's headlines. "It is as close to a mutiny as you will get in the British military establishment," wrote one defense correspondent. A common view was that the government's no-nonsense adviser had punctured its rhetoric, and let the public know that the armed forces were fed up with the extra burdens being laid upon them.

Regarding Iraq, Boyce (who retires in April) told one group of defense journalists that the conflict might last as long as four years, while the broader war against terrorism might endure for as long as 50. On another occasion, he wondered aloud, whether Britain should follow America so unconditionally. Downing Street was not best pleased. Boyce's latest candid outburst caused anger in government circles, not least because it knocked the NATO summit—and Blair's grandstanding—off the front pages. It also gave the impression that the firefighters' strike has left the armed forces unable to prosecute war in Iraq.

Just as serious for Blair is that Boyce has won the backing of Adm. "Sandy" Woodward, the task force commander during the Malvinas/Falklands campaign in 1982, and former Deputy Chief of the Defense Staff. "He told it exactly the way it was, and people should bloody know," he said. There can be no doubt whatsoever that there are profound differences within the British establishment. This is most marked over what some regard as the "vulgar imperialism" now emerging in the United States, a country which the "old school tie" networks of Britain view as culturally far too inadequate for such a role, and most certainly cannot be trusted to fulfill it, without Great British guidance and paternal control.

More Industrial Unrest

Still, the situation on the industrial front continues to escalate to 1979 levels. A wave of strikes across the public sector in sympathy with the firefighters is looming, as trade union leaders threaten widespread disruption. Strike action or walk-outs are set to spread to major airports, nuclear power stations, chemical plants and the London Underground as militancy intensifies throughout the union movement.

Ministers, who are being blamed for sinking a pay deal which could have ended the fire strike, are now facing action that could bring parts of the country to a virtual standstill in the run-up to Christmas, and some are already wondering aloud whether a suitable "apology for absence" is now being prepared for the Americans, for British non-arrival in Iraq. Members of the GMB general union working in nuclear power stations and in chemical plants, are expected to walk out on safety grounds, because of the lack of fire cover.

A spokesman for the giant GMB union stated, "The problem is that Downing Street is professionally incapable of dealing with the unions. The government has moved this from a dispute between the FBU and the government, to one between the government and the union movement as a whole." Airport security and fire staff could walk out the last week of November, if talks over pay and conditions with the British Airport Authority, which runs Heathrow and Gatwick, are not resolved. The unions representing those airport workers, the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and Amicus, are holding out for an extra 0.5%. The Airport Authority offered security staff and firemen 1.7% this year and 3.5% next year. Both unions rejected this, and negotiators have been trying to get BAA to offer 4% in the second year.

The Rail, Maritime, and Transport Workers (RMT) union is balloting members on London Underground for strike action, in support of employees who refuse to work for safety reasons during the fire strike and are being sent home without pay. The result is expected on Dec. 19, with strike action to follow shortly after. The union has also warned other train companies, that any disciplinary action against workers who decline to work for safety reasons, will be considered grounds for a strike.

Whether we are talking about the fuel crisis, the foot-and-mouth disease disaster, or the fire brigades strike, Tony Blair has sought the same panacea: He takes personal charge of the situation. During the war of the petrol pumps, the Prime Minister was able to restrain the crisis within four days. This time it is not so evident that his intervention will have the same ameliorative effect. The situation in Britain, as 2002 moves into its final weeks, is one of chaos and confusion. If Tony Blair takes the country into war with Iraq, the betting that he will fall from office with the same cataclysmic speed as James Callaghan did almost a quarter of a century ago, must indeed be a banker.