

All the capitalist talents

BY SACHA ISMAIL

GORDON Brown's comment about wanting a "government of all the talents" was originally interpreted as signalling reconciliation with the "Blairite" faction within the Labour leadership. Since coming to office as Prime Minister, however, he has gone much further, offering positions to a wide-variety of right-wing, non-Labour figures in what looks like an attempt to construct a government of "national unity" (read: capitalist unity).

• Brown's camp have engineered and hailed the defection of Tory MP Quentin Davies. Previous Tory defector Shaun Woodward was, unsurprisingly, an anti-working class toff (he took his butler on the campaign trail at the last election), but at least a liberal on social issues (hence his departure from the Conservatives). Davies is a reactionary bigot.

This unrepentant Thatcherite ex-stockbroker, who in 2001 praised Thatcher for "turning round" the country and said that she "takes second place to no one" in his political affections, has also voted in favour of the death penalty and fox-hunting, and against extensions of gay rights. He hailed the crushing of the trade unions in the 1980s and in the 1990s described the minimum wage as a "crazy idea". His insis-

tence today that he has "always greatly admired" Gordon Brown is presumably part-toadying and part-truth.

• Perhaps even more significantly, Brown has appointed far-right Thatcherite and former head of the bosses' Confederation of British Industry, Digby Jones, as a minister of state in the new Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. Jones, who, since no one except his fellow capitalists has ever elected him to anything, will have to be made a life peer before he takes up office, naturally opposed the minimum wage and every other microscopic reform offered up by the Blair government as a sop to the labour movement.

• Brown is creating a new Business Council to advise on "all policies affecting business". This will be used to further promote the involvement of businessmen in government and remove further areas of public power from accountable, democratic control. (Brown: "It will be able to look at whether some parts of business policy – industrial policy, technology – should be independent of government, like the Bank of England is.") This Business Council will include well-known Thatcherite thug Alan Sugar and Tesco's gangster-in-chief Terry Leahy – and be chaired by private equity boss Damian Buffini, whose company Pereira's take-over of

AA was immediately followed by the sacking of 3,000 workers.

• Hawkish Admiral Sir Alan West, who as head of the Navy criticised the government for not spending enough money on big guns, has been appointed a junior Home Office minister in charge of security.

• There has been renewed flirting with the Lib Dems, with two Lib Dem lords signing on as Government advisers.

All this is anti-democratic in the extreme: ministers should be selected by and from the ranks of Parliament, not chosen by the Prime Minister from wherever, in effect, he feels like. In addition, however, the class dimensions is also obvious. Brown is attempting to build on Blair's work in creating a bourgeois political machine independent of what is left of the Labour Party, and immune to attempts by the labour movement to exercise control from below. Together with his moves to gut Labour Party conference, these appointments represent another move in the Blairites' struggle to push the organised working class out of politics, and create a new bourgeois political realignment.

Down with the minister-capitalists! As part of a fight to challenge the Labour leadership, the labour movement must demand the removal of these bourgeois parasites from the government.

Metronet goes under

BY A TUBE WORKER

AS we go to press it appears that Metronet, the London Underground "Infraco" is going into administration. The Public Private Partnership Arbitrator has indicated that he will not agree to the company's demand that London Underground pay for its incompetence, and LUL will "only" have to pay Metronet an additional £121 million rather than the £551 million it had asked for. That's not a one-off, that's the four-weekly Infrastructure Service Charge.

The prospect of administration presents immediate concerns for the workforce, the first of which is whether they will be paid.

The next issue is that the maintenance and improvement of the Tube has to continue, otherwise the Underground will stop. The only way to ensure this is to bring the Infraco contract directly back into a reintegrated London Underground, transferring all employees back to LUL.

You can be sure that Gordon Brown's government, desperate not to admit the failure of their flagship "tunnelvision" PPP policy will be looking for an 'under-table' solution that keeps PPP but rids us of Metronet. Give it to TubeLines, maybe? Or how about Network Rail? Or perhaps they might invent some new arms-length-independent-not-for-(much)-profit quango?!

Less than a fortnight after its shoddiness caused a Central Line train to derail, everyone knows that Metronet is crap. But the government – and probably LUL – will be keen to have us believe that the only problem is that Metronet is crap. The truth is that the entire PPP set-up is dismal, and is matching ours and the unions' predictions that it would be a disaster for the Underground.

The other Infraco – TubeLines – must be rubbing their hands with glee. Many people seem to be labouring under the misconception that TubeLines are great, but really they only look great because Metronet are so supremely crap. Remember the Northern Line emergency brakes fiasco? The Piccadilly line cracked wheel sets? The derailments at Camden Town and Barons Court?! The cull of cleaners' jobs? TubeLines.

Amongst all the furore about Metronet being crap, we should also remember that it is their management that is crap. Their workforce are skilled and hardworking people, doing their best under appalling management, even with insufficient kit to get the work done. Hey, perhaps if the workers ran the job, we wouldn't be in this mess to start with.

The unions will all no doubt say the right thing: that PPP must be ended. But they should do more than just say so. They should mobilise to make it happen – industrial action to defend Metronet workers, plus mobilisation of all Tube workers and of the travelling public to demand an end to the PPP fiasco.

Gordon Brown's democracy

BY AMINA SADDIQ

ON 3 July, in a statement to the House of Commons, Gordon Brown announced his plans for a series of reforms to Britain's bourgeois democratic system, reforms which he claims are intended "to hold power more accountable and to uphold and enhance the rights and responsibilities of the citizen."

His ideas include holding elections on week-ends in order to increase turnout, rescinding or revising the ban on protests in Parliament Square, introducing an elected element to the House of Lords, and new powers for voters to participate directly in local decision-making. He also raises the possibility of a written constitution to replace the UK's current ramshackle set up. However, the centre piece is undoubtedly Brown's declaration that the Government will cede a number of decision-making powers to Parliament.

The list of powers Brown promises to bestow on Parliament is surprisingly extensive. It includes: declaration of war; dissolution and recall of Parliament; ratification of international treaties; determining Parliamentary oversight of the intelligence services; appointment of judges; power over the civil service; the issue



Brian Haw's peace protest camp in Parliament Square – the restoration of the right to protest near Parliament is amongst Brown's proposals

of passports, and the granting of pardons. It will, if it happens, be significant.

The devil may be in the detail; but if the Brown government does surrender anything like these powers to Parliament, it will mean at least a partial reversal of the concentration of executive power and "presidentialisation" of British politics which the Blair did so much to accelerate. Of course Brown is trying to gain the political advantage by underlining the difference of his approach from Blair's; but it may also be that for all their anti-working class elitism, the Brown camp really do regret the downgrading of Parliament, and are alarmed by the general contempt in which it is now held – and so want to partially renovate and re-establish its authority.

For socialists, who in politics, as in economics, are concerned above all to establish genuine control from below, such reforms are not meaningless. However, we should approach them not only with a strong dose of scepticism, but with a sharp awareness of their limitations and a clear democratic vision we can counterpose to the system Brown seeks to reform.

Brown's changes will do relatively little to alter the increasingly bureaucratic, secretive and unaccountable character of the British state, or curb the growing power of the state over "its" citizens.

For that socialists need to raise demands like the abolition of the monarchy and the House of

Lords, disestablishment of the Church (which the priest's son Brown mentions in the statement only so that he can reject it out of hand!), a democratic republic, the limitation of all state officials to a workers' wage – these are vital elements of the politics with which socialists should seek to re-arm the labour movement in the struggle against Brown, his government and the class they represent. At present, unfortunately, the labour movement has even less to say about democratic questions than it does about wages, conditions and social rights.

Immediately, though, we must challenge the Brownites' technocratic vision of why political engagement is currently at such a low level. Voting on Sundays, in the supermarket, online etc, will do nothing to lift the prevailing apathy about politics. Rather it will merely increase the atomisation and depoliticisation of the electorate. Turn out in elections has fallen not for some technical reason, but because, with the political decline of the labour movement and the Blairite coup in the Labour Party, working-class people have less and less to engage and involve them. Without a working-class party, democratic rights such as the vote are radically devalued for workers.

For Brown, who is seeking to destroy what little is left of the Labour Party's democratic structure (see back page), to present himself as a champion of democracy is startling hypocrisy. A big part of our job is to puncture that.

Leon Trotsky advocated a programme to "regain democracy" in France in 1934:

“AS long as the majority of the working class continues on the basis of bourgeois democracy, we are ready to defend it with all our forces... However, we demand from our class brothers who adhere to 'democratic' socialism that they be faithful to their ideas... Down with the Senate, which is elected by limited suffrage... Down with the Presidency of the republic, which serves as a hidden point of concentration for the forces of militarism and reaction! A single assembly must combine the legislative and executive powers... Deputies would be... constantly revocable by their constituents, and would receive the salary of a skilled worker... A more generous democracy would facilitate the struggle for workers' power... It is not enough to defend democracy; democracy must be regained.”