

## GENERAL ELECTION 2005



# TRUST AND DEMOCRACY

## WHY BRITAIN NEEDS RADICAL DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

The issue of “trust” has emerged as one of the major issues in this election. Can we trust Tony Blair, Michael Howard or Charles Kennedy? Behind this is the Iraq war. Did Blair lie to the country over the war? The Tories have seized on this as one of their main campaigning themes. They say the issue is Blair’s personal integrity. But this is not helping the Tories. Nobody trusts Michael Howard’s integrity either. Many people are uneasy in any case about focusing too much on personalities and not policies.

There is no doubt that Blair deliberately misled the country over the war. Whether he actually lied is another matter. In some ways it misses the point. If he didn’t lie it was because he had so much power he didn’t need to. He could carry out his criminal policy without it. The point is that the war was decided in Washington. It was not decided in Britain. It was not decided by the cabinet. It was not decided by parliament. It was not decided by the people. A majority of the people opposed the war and millions demonstrated on the streets against it.

Blair and a small group of political advisers and officials decided to back Bush’s plan for regime change in Iraq. The plan was illegal under the UN charter. It was therefore necessary to manage the media and parliament. From that flowed all the spin and

dodgy dossiers, for which Alistair Campbell is past master. Blair set out to take Britain into Bush’s war and to mislead, manoeuvre and to overcome all opposition

Gordon Brown gets closer to the heart of the matter. He was interviewed in the *Daily Telegraph* (30 April 2005) in response to the Tories and with his own ambitions in mind. He points to the prime minister being able to use the royal prerogative to launch military action without the approval of parliament. He says that “changes in the constitution are needed to restore trust in politics among an increasingly sceptical public”. He poses the question of “trust” in constitutional not in personal terms. He says “trust is not about Iraq; it is about the future of politics generally”. It is about political power and how it can be used in future.

Lack of trust and loss of confidence is much deeper than “Blair”. Can we trust any government operating under the present constitution? The issue is democratic power and accountability. Clare Short MP, who observed the process as an “insider”, says “the mistakes on Iraq and support for the US war on terror” are the most spectacular and serious manifestations of a deep malfunction in the British political system and in British constitutional arrangements.

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Under the Thatcher government but much more seriously under the Blair government, the checks and balances of the British government system have broken down". (Clare Short – "*An honourable deception?*" p277 Free Press London 2004)

In her resignation speech as a cabinet minister she explained that "the problem is the centralisation of power into the hands of the Prime Minister and an increasingly small number of advisors who make decisions in private without proper discussion" (see cover). "The consequence of this is that parliamentary majorities are taken for granted. Parliament is downgraded and ignored, the power of the Prime Minister is enhanced and the Cabinet sidelined". (p278)

Andreas Whittam Smith, writing in the *Independent* (18 April 2005) recognises the fact that we are badly governed. He points to a new book by Sir Christopher Foster ("British government in crisis"). Foster argues that no part of our constitution is performing effectively: not parliament, not cabinet, not ministers, not the Civil Service, not local authorities, not other parts of the public sector. Blair has hollowed out Britain's 'democracy'. Smith notes "the forms are the same. But the reality is that the Prime Minister and the state are steadily gaining arbitrary powers while our freedoms as citizens diminish"

In the *Independent on Sunday* (24 April 2005) Peter Osbourne ("Why politicians can't tell the truth- Channel 4) argues that "democracy does not simply imply the right to vote. We need to make informed decisions. If politicians lie to us, that isn't possible. Lying strips us of our democratic rights and turns into dupes. Once mendacity becomes a normal part of government statements....it becomes an exercise in manipulation and power".

At the 2001 election over 40% of the electorate did not vote. This is an indication that many people are alienated from the political system, its parties and politicians. Voting seems to make little or no difference to their lives. People have no trust or confidence in the system. The war in Iraq shed new light

on this. The people are excluded from power. It is concentrated and centralised into the hands of the Prime Minister and a small clique of ministers, civil servants and security chiefs.

The constitution with its democratic "checks and balances" against the abuse and manipulation of power is a myth. Parliamentary democracy is an empty shell. Real power resides elsewhere. Parliament maintains the pretence of democracy and illusions in it. Neither parliament nor people have control over government. What happened about Iraq is not unique. These methods of governing Britain are the norm not the exception.

The Iraq war was a watershed in British politics not simply because of what it exposed. The important fact was the massive involvement of people on the streets. There is no solution to the 'crisis of democracy' except through the mobilisation of the people. The system is busted and only 'people power' can and must "fix it". We cannot leave the job to the politicians and parties that benefit from the status quo.

Democracy is a fundamental issue for all of us. It is not only about our rights and liberties. Without real democracy the people have little or no means of influencing or changing policies on economic, social or environmental issues. This is why the working class and socialist movement should campaign for radical democratic change. We need a new party not tied to the current system that can lead the struggle for a new democracy – this is why we call for a republican socialist party. We need this party now.

## CALL TO RELAUNCH THE SA

On 12 March 2005 a socialist unity conference was held in Birmingham. The conference decided that we would relaunch the SA in the autumn of 2005. We set up a provisional organisation to plan and prepare for this. If you would like to work with us please contact the Socialist Alliance at - [samember@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:samember@hotmail.co.uk)

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