MP seeks

damages

dossier

By James Landale

POLITICAL REPORTER

the prospect of legal action

vative Central Office dossier.

for Monklands West and a

member of the Shadow Cabi-

yesterday from the Tory party

chairman, substantial dam-

They claim that Mr Clarke

was falsely accused in a docu-

ment called The Labour Par-

Voters doubt that Blair's government will live up to his party's promises

New supporters betray lack of faith in Labour



Blair: more popular than Labour's policies

may do better in the local

elections next Thursday than

their recent national opinion

poll ratings have suggested

In its latest poll for The

Times, MORI asked people

how they would vote in the

(Peter Riddell writes).

THE public has become more dubious about whether a Labour government would keep its promises and deliver improved living standards and welfare services, according to the latest MORI poll for The

The poll, undertaken last weekend, shows that, despite Labour's continuing high ratings, many of the party's newly won supporters are deliver on its promises. The latest poll, and previous ones, suggests that these switchers to Labour are motivated more by dislike of the Government and liking for Tony Blair

Council boost for Lib Dems

This question was asked

only in the 44 per cent of the

they are certain not to vote or

don't know, 26 per cent

support the Tories, 50 per

cent back Labour and 21 per

Excluding those saying

country with elections.

By Peter Riddell

personally than by enthusiasm for the party's policies.

MORI asked eight questions about expectations for a Labour government which were previously asked in March 1995. Public confidence in Labour's ability to deliver has declined over the 13 months for six of the eight measures, particularly improving living standards, keeping promises, improving sceptical about its ability to welfare state services and cutting unemployment. Some reflect the Labour leadership's attempt to lower expectations.

By contrast, Mr Blair has

same for just those saying

they are certain to vote. In

these areas, 28 per cent say

they would back the Tories if

there was a general election

port Labour and 17 per cent

the Liberal Democrats. The

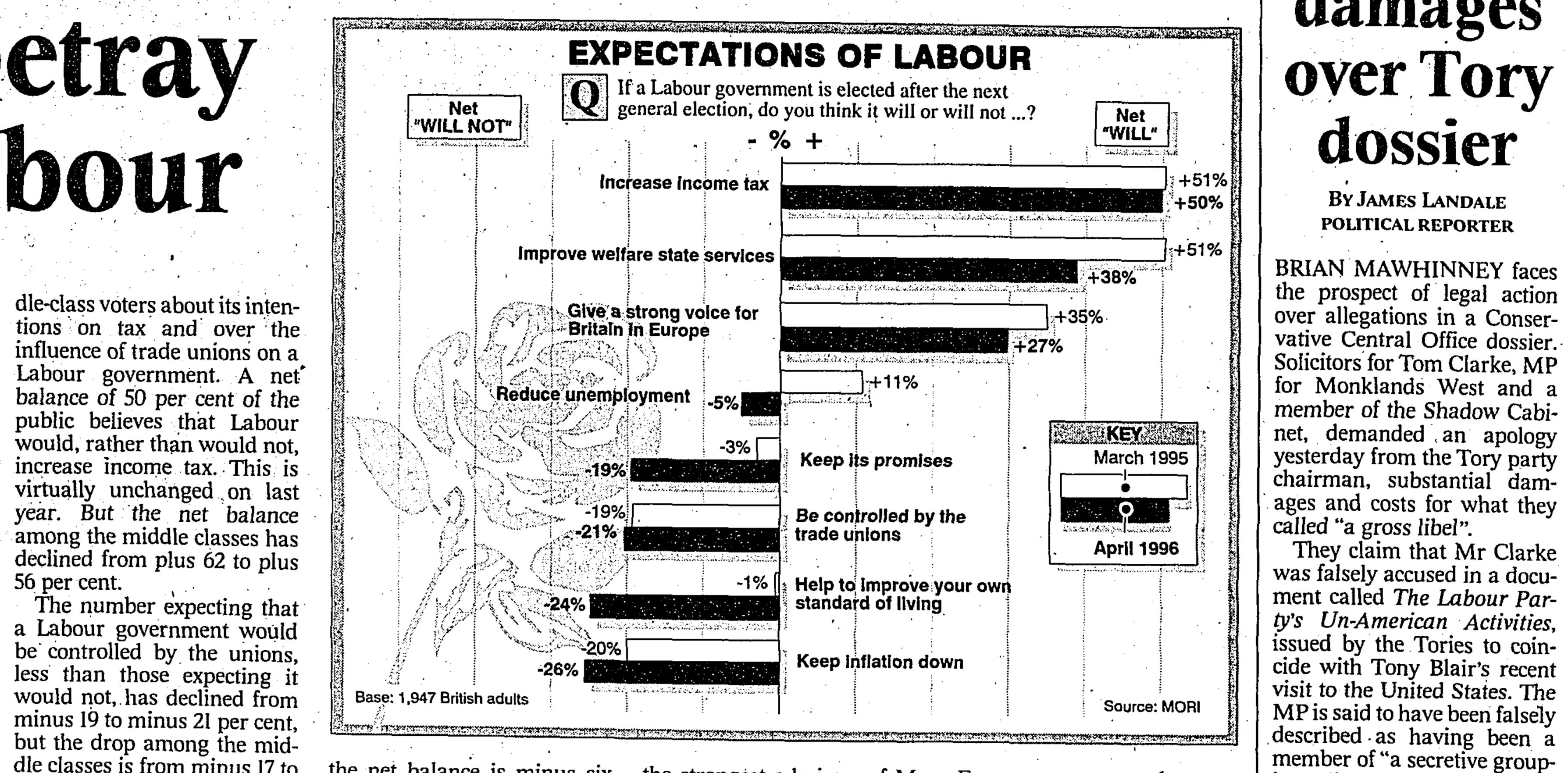
tomorrow, 54 per cent sup-

a Labour government would of this could, paradoxically, be controlled by the unions, less than those expecting it would not, has declined from minus 19 to minus 21 per cent. succeeded in reassuring midbut the drop among the middle classes is from minus 17 to minus 26 per cent.

56 per cent.

The most worrying point for Mr Blair is that Labour switchers who have started backing the party since 1992 are more sceptical than party supporters generally about whether a Labour government would keep its promises and improve living standards.

While Labour supporters expect that in government it will, rather than will not, improve living standards by a



the net balance is minus six points. A net balance of half the switchers believes that Labour would increase income tax, roughly the same as for the public as a whole, but comparing with a net balance of 36 points among Labour

supporters generally. These switchers believe even more than other Labour supporters that a future government would give a strong voice for Britain in Europe and would not be controlled

Blair's performance as leader, while 96 per cent of them are dissatisfied with the way the Government is running the country. This is higher than in any other group.

the strongest admirers of Mr

These poll findings underline that Labour's problem is the credibility of its policy pledges. Qualitative research about the attitudes of such switchers shows they are more dissatisfied with the Tories than committed to Labour.

Europe as among the most important issues facing Britain has risen from 16 to 20 per cent, the highest level since the NHS as an important issue has declined in recent months from about 40 per cent to 34 per cent, only just above education on 33 per cent

☐ MORI interviewed 1,947 adults on April 16 to 22. Voting intention figures exclude those who say they would not vote (10 per cent), are undecided (7 per cent) or who

press for other figures about tax

plans and the process could not be

controlled. The problems with detail

have been shown in the criticism of

his recent ideas about reallocating

For the moment, Mr Brown

intends to restate the principles of

tax strategy and argue that new

projects should be financed by

reallocating spending within exist-

ing budgets. But this is only a

partial answer. Labour does not just

have to deal with Tory propaganda.

As the new poll shows, the public is

dissatisfied with the Tories, but still

has doubts about what Labour

child benefit for 16 to 18-year-olds.

ing called The Supper Club" a left-wing faction which was concerned about Neil Kinnock's leadership — and havlast June. The number listing | ing been opposed to American Unemployment remains top.

in the United States." refuse to name a party (3 per cent)

cent the Liberal Democrats. same contrast has been true local elections on May 2. The figures are virtually the in previous local elections. net margin of plus 18 points, by the trade unions. The poll shows that the among switchers to Labour These switchers are among number of people mentioning Brown must do more to reassure worried taxpayers

he Labour leadership is in a bother again about tax — not about the details of its plans (which are genuinely undecided) but about how to handle the continuing political fuss over the issue. This is about the only area where Conservative Central Office has been able to put much pressure on Labour — and where the party's delaying tactics appear unconvincing. Labour leaders may even be relieved that the latest MORI poll shows no increase in the high proportion who already expect that a Labour government would raise income tax.

their attacks on Labour's tax plans increased public doubts about the Opposition's fitness to govern in both 1987 and 1992. And they are trying to do the same again. Labour leaders, and particularly Gordon Brown, have drawn the same lesson and have been doing everything possible to avoid giving ammunition to the Tories on tax.

This vacuum has given ample opportunity for Central Office to seize on even vague comments about higher taxes by Labour frontbenchers or surveys of the views of Labour MPs and candidates (as in today's Tribune). The divisions are Tax has become the symbolic mainly of detail and have been issue for both the Tories and magnified in importance by the Labour. Tory strategists believe that leadership's refusal to spell out burden. The level might be slightly Mr Brown is right that it is absurd of tax now, the Tories would then

ON POLITICS whether, and at what levels, higher

rates might be paid. The real differences between the

RIDDELL

parties on tax are small. As David Lipsey argues in the new collection of essays, What Needs to Change (edited by Giles Radice and published yesterday), governments have an influence on levels of spending, and hence taxes, only at the margin: as important, if not more, are the state of the economy and long-term demographic trends. After all, the Tories have found it hard even to

higher under Labour, but probably not much.

The better-off, who have done very well under the Tories, would probably pay more under Labour. But the top-marginal rate, now 40 per cent, would almost certainly not rise to the 60 per cent level it was under the Tories until 1988, let alone to the pre-1979 peak of 83 per cent. Labour wants to hold down the tax burden for those on average earnings and below.

But even if the Tory charges are grossly exaggerated, there are legitimate questions about Labour's broad spending and tax strategy. The Labour leadership believes it contain the growth of the overall tax cannot win by being candid now. Brown did announce a new top rate

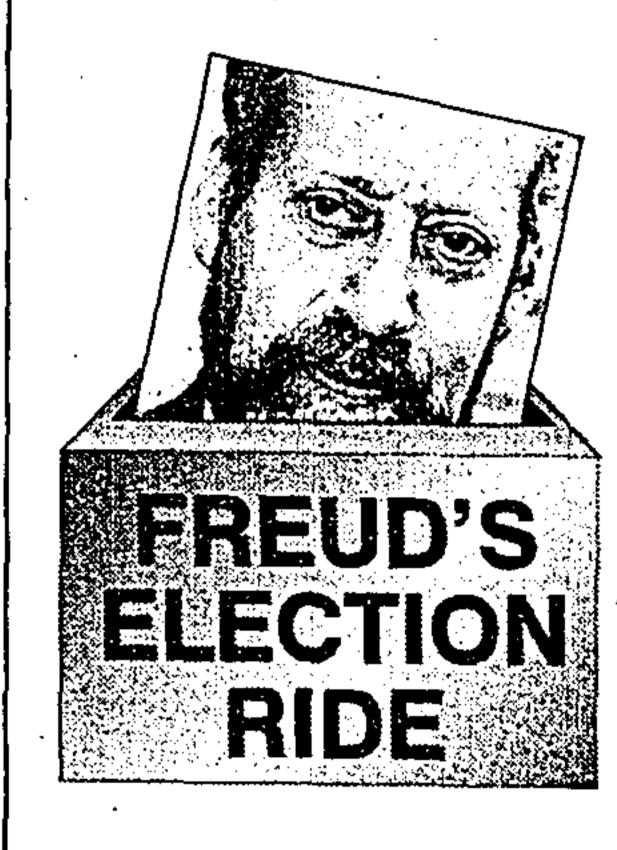
to expect Labour to spell out its precise tax plans now or in its draft manifesto in June when public borrowing figures are being revised upwards and the fiscal outlook will not be clear until after the November Budget.

Labour does not think it can, or should, copy Paddy Ashdown and announce "target taxes" for specific ends like nursery places and free eye and dental check-ups. That approach, Labour argues, may offer a distinctive, niche appeal for the Liberal Democrats, but it begs questions about overall spending and tax plans for a party seeking to be the next government. If Mr

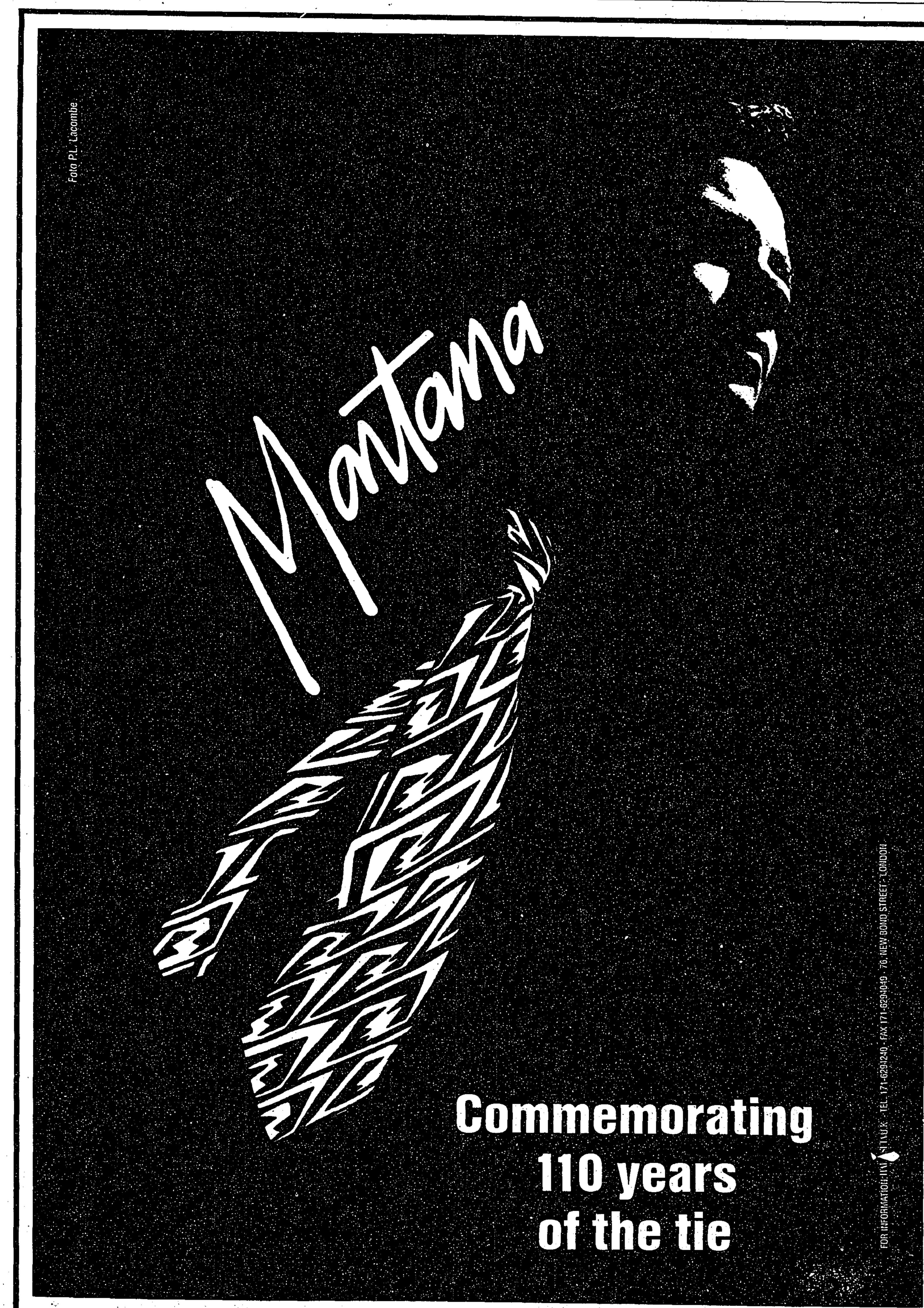
PETER RIDDELL

and British intervention in the Gulf War. Mr Clarke said that The Mail on Sunday had apologised and paid damages in 1991 after printing similar allegations. He added: "I am deeply hurt and angered, particularly as I have always had many friends and colleagues Tory officials said that the matter was being examined.

TOMORROW



Clement Freud in Stratford-upon-Avon





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