



THE  TIMES

Iraq rage drives family furies that will harry Blair at the ballot box

By Burhan Wazir

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In key constituencies across the country the casualties of war are making sure that they are heard

THIS is about rage. Incandescent anger. The kind of finger-curling, jaw-tightening fury that happens to everyone at least once in their lifetime. As Rose Gentle put it: "You get so angry that you can't see straight. You get so angry that nothing else matters. The rage stops you from grieving for your dead son."

The election, once pungent with the odour of familiarity has, in a number of constituencies, turned into a boxing match with a host of alternative and independent candidates launching a jeremiad against key ministerial constituencies. In seats such as East Kilbride, Strathaven & Lesmahagow Birmingham Hodge Hill and Sedgefield, Labour Party workers, fearful of being shouted at, keep a low profile from anti-war candidates. "Tony Blair lied, my son died," shouted Rose Gentle, 40, campaigning in East Kilbride, a blighted new town outside Glasgow, seemingly cursed by cold weather, where she is challenging Adam Ingram, the Armed Forces Minister.

As wind and rain whistled through wide avenues, Mrs Gentle, whose son Gordon, 19, died in Iraq last summer while serving with the Royal Highland Fusiliers, dropped leaflets door-to-door accompanied by supporters.

"I just take it day by day," she said, rubbing her hands together. "I just keep thinking about Gordon. The strange thing is, when he left for Iraq something told me that he wasn't going to make it back. I said that to my husband who told me I was being silly. But I just knew it: Gordon wasn't going to make it back. Call it intuition."

Earlier, Mrs Gentle sat on her couch at home in Pollock, surrounded by tributes and photographs of her son. Looking out of her living room window, she described her epiphany. While working in the Pollock Centre last summer, a greying shopping arcade scheduled for demolition, two men approached her. "They took me into their car and told me there was no other way to inform me; Gordon had died in Iraq. I just didn't believe them. And when I realised it was true, I just thought, 'What a waste of a beautiful life'. That's when I started to get angry."

As her husband, smiling and red-faced, fetched cups of coffee and cigarettes, Mrs Gentle stared into the distance. "I hate that stupid grin on Blair's face," she said. "He should resign for what he's done."

She wandered into Gordon's room: untouched since he died. Her husband sat at a PC in the corner, checking e-mails from supporters. In recent days, the Gentle family have had correspondence from the American film-maker Michael Moore.

"He says he wants to come and help us with the campaign," said Rose. "He wants to come over here and add his support to all the people who have lost sons and daughters in Iraq."

Later that evening, back in East Kilbride, Mrs Gentle and her volunteer team stumbled across a two men dropping leaflets on behalf of the Labour Party. They raced off. "We've got nothing to say to you," said one.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Mrs Gentle said, heading off towards another dank street. Her anger gives her grim determination. "None of us should be doing this. If Gordon hadn't died, none of us would be here right now. But what are we supposed to do? I just feel so angry about what happened."

The rage is more tempered in some communities across Britain. In a detached house in Mosley, Birmingham, Azmat Begg, whose son, Moazzam, 37, spent three years in detention, first at Baghram airbase in Afghanistan, later at Guantanamo Bay, has decided to challenge a seat in Hodge Hill, backed by Peace and Progress.

Mr Begg, 50, a retired banker who became the public and statesman-like figure behind the campaign to free his son, said: "I hadn't considered a career in politics. But when I was campaigning for the release of my son, a lot of people mentioned it to me. I am standing for them: I want to give them a voice. There are too many people who are living in a culture of fear in this country." Mr Begg said: "I have voted Labour my entire life, but I do not recognise this Government at all. It seems to be that Blair has abandoned all the principles that the party was built on."

His son is writing a book on his experiences. "I think we need to give people an understand of exactly where the War on Terror has led us," Mr Begg said. "There is a lot of wrong information out there."

Over in Sedgefield, another anti-war candidate is little short of incandescent. "This is the Big Match," boomed Reg Keys, 52, into a megaphone, standing on his bus. "May 5; Reg Keys v Tony Blair. The Big Event." Mr Keys, who is hoping to overturn

the Prime Minister's 17,713 majority, visited the Dun Cow Inn, the quaint pub where Mr Blair met President Bush in November 2003. Mr Keys, whose son, Lance Corporal Tom Keys, 20, was one of six Red Caps killed in a Iraqi police station in al-Majar al-Kabir on June 24, 2003, stood at the bar. "This is where I'll end the Bush/Blair axis," he said.

The owner looked on nervously. "I thought just a couple of people were coming in," he complained. "This is chaos. Absolute bedlam." Asked about Blair/Bush visit, he said: "I'd rather not go into that."

Mr Keys continued shouting: "Tony Blair lied to Britain and lied to the people of Sedgefield. He lied about the weapons of mass destruction." The bar owner finally asked them to leave.

As the campaign team emerged, Martin Bell, the "accidental" MP for Tatton, now lending his support to Mr Keys, grinned. "My Lord," he said. "He was very angry, wasn't he? He wasn't happy to see us at all. Very angry, indeed."

The screaming circus snaked its way through Sedgefield for most of the day, stopping at Ferryhill Market, a local shopping centre and the Labour Party constituency office.

Later that afternoon, John Burton, Mr Blair's constituency agent in Sedgefield, grinning behind his moustache, sat in his car outside a shop. He surveyed the Keys bandwagon with mild amusement. "I don't think there is an element of mistrust in the Prime Minister at all," said Mr Burton. "I've known Tony Blair for decades and I trust him completely."

He smiled when asked if locals were wasting their democratic obligation by voting for Mr Keys. "What can Reg Keys do for the people of Sedgefield?" he said. "Nothing. What can Tony Blair do? Well, he's the Prime Minister."

Over the next two weeks, the shouting might rise to a crescendo. The quiet men and women of Britain, ignored for too long, are turning up the volume.

KEY QUESTIONS ON THE LEGAL ADVICE WHICH TOOK BRITAIN TO WAR

Q: Why is the Attorney-General's legal advice so controversial?

A: The 13-page legal memo sent to the Prime Minister is the legal advice that the Government has refused to disclose. It canvasses the difficulties surrounding why the war on Iraq might not be justified in law. What is problematic is that the advice bears little relation to the subsequent statement the Attorney-General gave to the Cabinet and on which Britain went to war.

Q: Why would the Attorney-General or the Government not disclose the legal advice?

A: It is a long-standing tradition. The advice is seen as being protected by legal privilege, as any legal advice would be between a lawyer and a client. It also means the Attorney is free to be honest and not trim his advice according to what the Government wants to hear.

But the arguments for non-disclosure have been countered in this case by the fact that an exceptional issue — military intervention — was at stake. Also, disclosure of advice by an Attorney-General is not without precedent.

Q: How does the legal advice differ from what the Cabinet was told?

A: Lord Goldsmith's advice to the Prime Minister 12 days before Britain went to war contains six reasons why the legality of the war was susceptible to challenge under international law. Ten days later Lord Goldsmith issued a statement, on which the Cabinet made its decision. That statement did not include any of the equivocations of the original memo. It concluded that war was legal and the Cabinet had no sight of the fuller document. Lord Goldsmith's defence is that the statement was merely his own view.

Q: Should the 13-page legal advice have been disclosed to the Cabinet?

A: Many lawyers argue that the Attorney-General gives his advice to the Government as a whole and not just to the Prime Minister and should have been disclosed to the whole Cabinet.

Q: Did the Attorney-General change his view?

A: Elizabeth Wilmschurst, the Foreign Office legal adviser who resigned over the issue, says he changed his mind twice. She believed Lord Goldsmith supported the need for a second resolution. Then, when when he wrote his minute to the Prime Minister, he said that a second resolution might not be necessary. The summary to Cabinet was then a further change of heart, she said.

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