

# PublicFinance

## Brown's bitter end? By Helen Disney

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Prime Minister Gordon Brown's government these days brings to mind the image of the proverbial headless chicken. It keeps on running wildly, lurching from side to side, even after the final blows have been dealt.

Those who remember the dying days of the last Conservative administration will recognise all the telltale signs — accusations of sleaze and corruption, behind-the-scenes leadership wrangles and high-profile resignations.

The past few weeks have hardly covered the prime minister or his Cabinet colleagues in glory. Post-G20 and his trip to Washington, Brown was hoping to bask in the reflected glory of international statesmanship — but domestic troubles have fast put paid to that.

Voters are now more likely to remember the home secretary's embarrassing expenses claims or the resignation of Damian McBride, one of Brown's closest aides, over a series of scurrilous e-mails designed to smear opposition leaders.

The Conservative Party is now demanding an apology. Brown has already acknowledged the scale of the embarrassment to both his government and his party by writing personal letters to the individuals concerned. The Conservatives have also called on Cabinet secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell to clarify who knew about the proposal to set up the Labour website, Red Rag, where it was suggested the smears be published. Meanwhile, shadow Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude said the case raised 'serious concerns' about the entire Number 10 operation.

The underhanded nature of last weekend's revelations about Labour spin has indeed added a new layer of grime to a government whose reputation for trustworthiness had already been severely tarnished. McBride has provided one notable scalp but voters will also be asking questions about other high-profile figures, including beleaguered Home Secretary Jacqui Smith.

Even putting aside the issue of her extensive expenses claims, it is more than worrying that Britain's police forces are now embroiled in further controversy. At a time when we are still on high alert for terrorist attacks, Bob Quick's resignation as the country's most senior counter-terrorism officer, after mistakenly revealing a secret document to photographers when he arrived at Downing Street, is only the latest embarrassment.

This was a potentially disastrous security bungle, adding to the growing picture of mismanagement and incompetence at the Home Office.

Questions are still being raised about the death of Ian Tomlinson during the G20 demonstrations on April 1, after witness footage showed him being pushed over by a police officer shortly before he died of a heart attack. Metropolitan Police commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson has now ordered a review of public order policing following footage showing another police officer using force against a female protester.

But, perhaps even worse, there are also concerns about the ability of the Independent Police Complaints Commission to conduct a fair and efficient investigation. Trust in public services is breaking down in a serious way when we do not have confidence in bodies that are specifically designed to represent independence and public accountability.

The polls bear out this mood. The latest Populus survey, taken earlier this month, put the Conservatives well ahead on 43% with Labour on 30%, even before the latest scandal broke. Questioned about abuse of parliamentary expenses and allowances, 69% felt that either all or a majority of MPs were guilty of fiddling the system.

In the US, if public money is being used to fund a new project you will often find a sign stating that this is 'your tax dollars hard at work'. Who knew that in Britain in 2009, such signs would have to be scheduled for erection at the doors of a high street bank?

As the rest of the population make cutbacks and find savings or face the prospect of unemployment and pay cuts, it is galling to know that our tax pounds are not hard at work at all. Instead, they are being squandered on dubious expenses claims, used to prop up failing banks, or paying for what are often dysfunctional public services.

Voters tend to opt for change after a government has been in power for more than a decade but Britain's problems now run deeper than the usual discontent with an incumbent administration.

Our economic woes will linger on for many years to come, public services are in serious need of reform and, perhaps most importantly of all, trust in the whole process of politics needs to be restored.

With not much time left to call the next general election, it is hard to imagine what could now revive a government that seems intent on reminding us that, contrary to the high hopes that many once held of New Labour, sleaze is as alive and well in 2009 as it was in the spring of 1997.

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