

BRENDAN O'NEILL SAYS...



THE MEGRAHI AFFAIR HAS REVEALED A UK GOVERNMENT IN DISARRAY



When Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al-Megrahi left Britain, on a specially chartered flight from Glasgow Airport to Tripoli, he seems to have taken with him the last vestiges of the New Labour government's authority.

The events surrounding the release of the man convicted for the Lockerbie bombing have exposed, beyond any doubt, the incompetence, incoherence and moral exhaustion of New Labour under Gordon Brown.

Indeed, it is hard to see how the government can recover from this affair and its impact on Britain's standing in the international arena. As Megrahi is treated as a hero in Libya, Brown is exposed as a zero in Britain.

Many commentators have argued that the release of Megrahi was part of some grand Blairite/Brownite conspiracy to suck up to Colonel Gaddafi in order to secure a good oil deal.

Sounding like a dyed-in-the-wool left-winger, the former Tory foreign secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, says the whole thing was a "conspiracy" motivated by New Labour's desire to "enhance trade with Libya and help BP in particular".

Journalists write about the "dirty secrets" of the Megrahi affair and describe his release as an 'oil-for-terrorist deal' – in short, the government exchanged a convicted killer for cheap energy.

I don't buy this. If it had been a trade-driven conspiracy, then that would suggest the New Labour government was acting fairly normally – after all, underhand deals have been part and parcel of international realpolitik for decades.

But the Megrahi affair has exposed a government that is acting increasingly abnormally. It has exposed a



Taxi for Brown?
The PM is looking for a way out of his current mess

government that seems incapable of taking responsibility for its decisions, thinking through the consequences of its actions, or doing what is in its own best interests. The Megrahi debacle suggests the New Labour government is too unanchored and unserious to organise anything like a Libya-prisoner-oil conspiracy.

The most striking thing about the Megrahi affair has been Whitehall's unwillingness to take responsibility for it. Anyone with even a GCSE in international relations would know that releasing the man convicted for the Lockerbie bombing was a Very Big Decision that could have important international repercussions.

They would be able to predict that such a move might impact on Britain's close relationship with America in particular (169 of the 243 passengers killed on Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 were US citizens) and therefore that Britain's top political leaders – Brown and David Miliband especially – ought to think about the decision carefully and formulate some good justifications for it.

Instead, Whitehall outsourced authority for the Megrahi decision to the Scottish Government, and to Scottish justice secretary Kenny MacAskill in particular. The reason MacAskill has become the public face of the Megrahi affair is because the London-based leaders of the UK have effectively said, Bart Simpson-style, "It's nothing to do with us."

They continually shifted the responsibility for the Megrahi affair to Scotland. In the correspondence between Scottish leaders and New Labour leaders, which has now been published on the

Foreign Office website, Whitehall officials made it clear to Edinburgh – "over and over again," as one media report put it – that Scotland alone was responsible for this decision.

This suggests that New Labour lacks the political cojones to take meaningful responsibility for major events, and also the everyday

'New Labour isn't capable of a terrorist-for-oil conspiracy'

diplomatic foresight to predict that such a decision might cause global ripples that Brown would need to address and manage.

After being taken by surprise by the international reaction to the Megrahi release, New Labour then decided that the best way to deal with it was to say nothing. In an extraordinary abdication of political responsibility, the government went into PR hibernation for at least three or four days following Megrahi's release.

Miliband, who is ostensibly in charge of all foreign matters that pertain to Britain, simply kept saying: "This was a Scottish decision." Brown's spokesman said it was such a "uniquely sensitive" issue that it wouldn't be appropriate for Brown – the prime minister of the UK! – to comment on it.

It took Brown a remarkable 119 hours to make any remark about Megrahi's release. By comparison, it took him only six hours to respond to the news of Jade Goody's death, and 18 hours to enquire about the

health of Britain's Got Talent singer Susan Boyle when it was reported she'd had a nervous breakdown.

And now that Whitehall officials have finally realised they must do something to troubleshoot the Megrahi fallout, they are behaving so rashly and unpredictably that they are making things worse.

Most strikingly of all, Brown changed his position on Libya's need to pay compensation to the victims of IRA terrorism in response to outraged media reports.

Initially Brown said he would not press Libya over compensation; a few hours later, following some stinging critical news commentary, he changed his mind. This threatens to damage Britain's relationship with Libya, something that both Blair and Brown have cultivated over the past five years.

Having unthinkingly savaged Britain's close ties with Washington by failing to think through the Megrahi decision, New Labour is now potentially wrecking its relations with an important Arab nation simply because Brown wants to appease some hothead journalists.

This is a government completely out of control. A government so bereft of political direction and moral authority that it can seriously damage its own domestic and international reputation over the release of one prisoner. If only this was a terrorist-for-oil deal... But it wasn't. It was something worse: not a conspiracy by government, but a collapse of government. ●

Brendan O'Neill is editor of independent political site Spiked, www.spiked-online.com



Can the government recover before the general election?
Email editorial@bigissuescotland.com and tell us what you think

