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Brown faces new threats to authority

Call for Scottish independence piles more pressure on embattled PM

Patrick Wintour
and Severin Carrell

Gordon Brown was facing fresh battles on three fronts to retain his political authority yesterday as senior figures challenged him over Scottish independence, 42 days detention and the 10p tax climbdown.

Returning to Westminster still reeling from the disastrous local election results, he was first forced to distance himself from calls by the leader of the Scottish Labour party, Wendy Alexander, to back an early referendum on Scottish independence.

Alexander had been privately pressing Brown for permission to make the call for months, but appeared to defy Number 10 over the weekend leaving Brown's aides to concede that they opposed her call.

The unilateral initiative left some ministers and backbench MPs aghast. One minister said: "She has been pestering Brown about this for months, and he had said no, and now she has used his weekend of the greatest vulnerability and weakness, to press ahead."

"We are completely perplexed why she has done it now. It is entirely disingenuous for her to say it was the first anniversary of the Scottish elections, or she was simply answering a question from a journalist."

At a press conference in Edinburgh, Alexander did not pretend she had Brown's support, but said she might table a bill calling for an early referendum.

She said: "The SNP tactics are all about delay and fomenting grievance. I firmly believe the SNP should not be allowed to control the question, the timing and the agenda. It is the SNP running scared here. They don't speak for Scotland's interests, they speak for themselves."

The SNP, which does not favour producing a referendum bill until 2010 at the earliest, took delight in the "unorganised and freelance operation" run by Alexander and claimed Labour was in turmoil on the issue.

At Westminster, two issues that have dogged the government in recent months

were also reignited. The former home secretary Charles Clarke demanded Brown abandon plans for 42 days of detention for terrorism suspects. Clarke personally supports longer detention but argued that parliament had settled the issue when MPs voted in March 2006 to back only 28 days.

Clarke also told Brown to "finish with dog whistle language, such as British jobs for British workers, which flatter some of the most chauvinistic and backward looking parts of society".

In a move designed to allow a wider set of Labour voices to enter the debate on Labour's future, he also called for Brownites to end the "divisive inner party briefing and bullying which penalises and inhibits debate about the future."

At the first cabinet meeting since the elections last Thursday, Brown was urged to come up with a clear compensation package quickly for those hit by the withdrawal of the 10p tax rate. The prime minister had been trying to lower the political temperature to give the Treasury time to work out the details.

The Treasury wants to be specific but is concerned not to announce measures that may unravel or be open to fraud.

But with David Cameron pledging yesterday to make the 10p issue his chief campaign tool in the Crewe and Nantwich byelection on May 22, Labour MPs are urging Brown he does not have the political luxury of delay.

Leading backbench rebels Frank Field and Greg Pope met the chancellor, Alistair Darling, yesterday to urge him to give clear details of the compensation package and to ensure it would be backdated. Darling in turn urged them not to revolt again.

Field said: "It's crucial that people who have lost out from the 10p don't feel deserted by us. I plead with the government to act today and give us a public statement on what I know they are committed to and working on in private."

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Panic after the storm - the scramble for survival in Burma



Burmese soldiers unload boxes of noodles, part of an aid shipment from Thailand Photograph: Vorasit Satienerk/Reuters

As the death toll in Burma from Cyclone Nargis rises towards 30,000, one resident of Rangoon describes the desperate search for food, water and shelter in the city since the storm struck on Saturday

Max Quincey Rangoon

Having survived the cyclone, the struggle now is for survival. First there is the scramble for fresh water, with long lines all over Rangoon to buy it by the bucketload at three times the price it was before the cyclone.

Then there is the hunt for shelter among the debris in a city where more homes are now without roofs than with them, and as desperation grows, there are reports of looting in some markets.

Huge queues snake from those petrol stations still functioning. Fuel has doubled in price.

In Shwe Pauk Kan township in Ran-

goon most of the houses have been largely or totally destroyed. People are crammed into the few remaining large buildings, including a school housing 600 children, 450 women and 250 men. The head, U Maung Maung Aye, opened it to anyone who could make it. He shows off a well and a small generator allowing clean water to be pumped. But without assistance, he said, he didn't know how long he could feed people.

"I have 1,300 refugees who have lost their homes and have nothing left and needed a place to sleep, gather their small belongings, and a place to dry them. I am providing them with two meals out of the generosity of donors. I have two pregnant ladies and they are soon due," he said.

Among those who took refuge in the school was Shwe Zin, who showed me her stitched hand and bandaged head.

"The roof came down on me. I got off lightly but my 19-year-old son is at the hospital with a serious head trauma. A fireman came to save us but he also got injured," she said.

Few were prepared for what happened, which goes some way to explain a death toll in the tens of thousands and may yet rise further. Last night more than 22,000 were confirmed dead with 41,000 still missing. The authorities said the cyclone would hit much further north but, as the rains intensified, the meteorological department warned that it was changing course, gathering strength and heading for Rangoon.

Despite the warning, most people went to bed with little idea of what to expect. By midnight on Friday the 120mph winds were whipping the city as the cyclone began its crawl through the city. It was not only the power of the storm that terrified; its staying power was deadly. It felt like it went on for ever, ripping at our sturdy house, shattering glass, ripping away part of the roof, dumping huge amounts of water into the exposed rooms. A large mango tree threatened to crush the

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Financial

Privatised post not delivering - report

The government's strategy of opening the postal market to private sector competition has provided no significant benefits for consumers and smaller businesses while threatening the future of the Royal Mail, an independent report commissioned by ministers has warned. The report, by former media regulator Richard Hooper for business secretary John Hutton, says that large companies have benefited from full liberalisation of the market since 2006. But it warns there is now "a substantial threat" to Royal Mail's financial stability and the universal service of deliveries to addresses throughout the UK.



National

BBC and ITV launch free satellite service

ITV and BBC are launching a digital satellite television service that will offer up to 200 channels - including free high-definition programmes - from both broadcasters for a one-off fee with no contract. Freesat will initially offer 80 channels, rising to 200 by the end of the year when the service will be available to 98% of the population. A standard box is expected to cost upwards of £49, while the HD version will cost £120 with an installation fee of about £80. The companies are investing £3m each a year in a bid to have more control of their digital destiny ahead of the 2012 switch off date for the analogue signal.

International

Retiring Ahern's tribute to Paisley

The Irish premier Bertie Ahern spent his final day in office by joining Northern Ireland's first minister Ian Paisley yesterday to open a new centre commemorating the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 when Prince William of Orange defeated the Catholic King James II. In his last major speech as Taoiseach, Ahern paid tribute to Paisley for helping fulfil the greatest achievement of his 11 years in office - peace and a stable political settlement in Northern Ireland. Ahern and Paisley cut a blue ribbon outside Oldbridge House, the centre near the battle site which will house artefacts about the Protestant victory, using two 17th-century swords.

Sport

Extra matches to fund Lord's revamp

Lord's could host neutral Test matches as part of an expanded programme of world-class fixtures stretching beyond England Tests and one-day internationals, to help the MCC fund a £200m redevelopment. The MCC is also in advanced negotiations with the Indian Premier League and the American financier Sir Allen Stanford to bring top-class Twenty20 matches to the home of cricket as early as this September. Keith Bradshaw, the MCC's chief executive, has been to India where he held talks with the league's commissioner, Lalit Modi, over bringing the Twenty20 Champions League to Lord's.