

Don't cry for Clare

As Tony Blair's licensed rebel, Short
appeased the powerful and brushed the poor aside

Some of the Guardian's readers will, for all her faults, have shed a few tears at the departure of our [Britain's] development secretary. Clare Short may have failed, in March, to act upon her threat to resign over the war with Iraq. But even those who have turned against her will miss that splash of colour on the front benches, the old Labour warrior who still spoke the language of feeling, and who, as if by magic, had somehow survived the control freaks and the little grey men for six vivid and tumultuous years. Westminster will be a bleaker and a colder place without her.

Well, dry your eyes. Clare Short survived because she was useful. She was as much a creature of the control freaks as any of the weaker members of the frontbench. To understand her role in government is to begin to understand the nature of our post-oppositional, postmodern political system.

Short was a licensed rebel. She was permitted, to a greater degree than any other minister, to speak her mind about the business of other departments. She was able to do so because she presented no threat to them or to Blair's core political programme. Within her own department, where her decisions made a real impact on people's lives, she was more Blairite than Blair. She would emote with the wretched of the earth for the cameras, then crush them quietly with a departmental memo.

She was useful to the government because she behaved like someone guided by impulse rather than calculation. As a result, she permitted it to suggest that it remained a broad church, and the prime minister a broad-shouldered man. Her

outbursts allowed the control freaks to pretend that they were not control freaks.

We have, in other words, been sold Short. Blair told us she had integrity, and, correctly interpreting her role, she acted as if she did. But she knew precisely where the limits lay, and when that “integrity” needed to be jettisoned. Her authenticity was prescribed. As a result she was, in some respects, a more dangerous figure than visibly ruthless ministers such as Alan Milburn or John Reid.

If you think this sounds harsh, you should examine her record. Clare Short’s approach to overseas development was more authoritarian than that of her Tory predecessor, Lynda Chalker. “Who represents the people of the world?” she asked the BBC World Service in November 2001. “It’s the governments who come from civil societies. Having lots of NGOs squawking all over the place won’t help. They don’t speak for the poor, the governments do.” Her deputy, Hilary Benn, repeated the sentiment: “The future is a matter of political will and choice, and only governments have both the legitimacy and the opportunity to exercise that will.”

There is, in other words, no such thing as society, unrepresented by government. The people’s organisations that seek to question governmental decisions – the trade unions, peasant syndicates, associations of shanty dwellers or indigenous people – are an irrelevant nuisance, the surly and recalcitrant natives who cannot interpret their own best interests. If a government, however corrupt and unrepresentative it may be, says it wants a particular kind of development, then the people are deemed to want it too.

Throughout her tenure, delegations of squawking NGOs came from the poor world to beg Clare Short not to destroy their lives. They were often brushed aside with a ruthlessness that made Peter Mandelson look like Bagpuss the cat.

Last year, a group of peasant farmers from the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh travelled to Britain to ask the department for international development not to fund the state government’s Vision 2020 programme. Its purpose was to replace small-scale farming with agro-industry. While a few very wealthy farmers, seed and chemical companies, some of them closely connected to the government, would make a great deal of money from the scheme, some 20 million people would be thrown out of work. A leaked memo from Short’s own department revealed that the project suffered from “major failings”, threatened the food security of the poor, and offered no plans for “providing alternative income for those displaced”.

A citizens’ jury drawn from the social groups that the scheme is supposed to help rejected it unanimously. Yet Short ignored their concerns and instructed her department to give the state government £65m.

In 2000, a group of Bagyeli pygmies from Cameroon came to Britain to alert the

MONBIOT | DON'T CRY FOR CLARE

department to the dangers associated with the oil pipeline the companies Exxon and Chevron were planning to build through their land. The World Bank was preparing to help the oil companies to pay for it, and Clare Short was intending to provide some of the money the World Bank would use. The Bagyeli claimed that their land would be seized by incomers, that they would be attacked by the pipeline workers, exposed to new diseases and denied their hunting and gathering rights.

Clare Short intervened personally to ensure that the pipeline was built. "Britain," she claimed, "will use its influence to insist that all appropriate controls are in place and that they are implemented rigorously." The pipeline is now being constructed, with the department's money, and everything the Bagyeli predicted has come to pass. They are suffering from epidemics of Aids, malaria and bronchitis, brought in by the workers. They have lost much of their land and are rapidly losing their forests.

When, at the end of last year, a pressure group called the Forest People's Programme reminded Clare Short of the promises she had made, she responded that such campaigners were "opposed to the interests of people in developing countries", by which, of course, she meant the governments.

She also championed the Chinese government's plan to move 60,000 Han farmers into the predominantly Tibetan region of western Qinghai. The World Bank's own inspection panel found that the project would be catastrophic for the indigenous people: it offended the bank's guidelines on consultation, the protection of ethnic minorities and the defence of the environment; but Short, as a director, continued to argue that the bank should help the Chinese government to fund it.

To facilitate such projects, Clare Short has pressed for the weakening of the World Bank's guidelines – for which people's movements in the poor world have fought so hard – which prevent it from funding schemes that force tens of thousands from their homes, trash the environment and enrich only the elites. In future, her department has suggested, the bank should give its money to governments with fewer strings attached.

There was, in other words, no conflict between Short's work and that of the government as a whole. The central project of Blair's foreign policy is the appeasement of the powerful. Clare Short ensured that this principle informed the business of her department. She was forced to resign yesterday not because she had rebelled, but because she had destroyed her credibility as a rebel. Having squandered her old Labour credentials, she was of no further use to the New Labour government. Goodbye Clare Short, and good riddance. #