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Blunkett's demise is classic Shakespearean tragedy

By Gideon Long

LONDON, Dec 16 (Reuters) - When a respected but flawed public figure resigns from office, pundits, headline writers and colleagues habitually describe the event as "tragic".

But seldom can this potent little word, carried down to us from the ancient Greeks, have been used with such poignancy as in the tale of David Blunkett, the British cabinet minister who fell on his sword late on Wednesday.

This is the story of a poor boy who overcame blindness to climb the greasy pole of politics, only to be destroyed by his obsessive love for a rich married woman and allegations he took unfair advantage of his position to help her.

Throw in the early death of his father, an astonishing attack on his cabinet colleagues, a divorce, an unborn baby and close ties to a prime minister desperate to hold on to power, and all the elements of dramatic tragedy fall into place.

Shakespeare would have killed for such a plot.

"A man or woman, an Othello, a Hamlet, a Cleopatra dramatically falls and the earth shakes," Bishop of Southwark Tom Butler said in a rare comment on the Blunkett saga from a man of the Church.

"These classic characters ... are towering figures, yet none of them is without flaw, and their story develops in scene after scene until their disaster is inevitable," he said in a personal reflection on the affair on BBC radio.

Britain's tabloid newspapers were similarly moved.

"The man who loved too much," was the Daily Mail's description of Blunkett in a headline which echoed Shakespeare's Othello, the tragic hero who, by his own dying admission, "lov'd not wisely, but too well".

Blunkett's life story is extraordinary by any standards.

Born blind to poor parents in the northern industrial city of Sheffield, he was sent away to boarding school at just four years old.

At 11, his father died a slow and painful death after falling into a vat of boiling water at work.

Blunkett went on to university, forged his political career on Sheffield city council and worked his way up to become one of the most forthright if controversial home secretaries in British history.

A 57-year-old divorcee with three children from his marriage, he precipitated his fall from grace by indulging in a 3-year affair with Kimberly Quinn, a married American woman now pregnant with a child whom Blunkett says is his.

Renowned as a blunt speaker, Blunkett compounded his woes by lambasting his colleagues in his biography. He later conceded his jibes were born of "arrogance". The ancient Greeks might have called it hubris.

"Political commentators constantly talk about hubris," said Roy Hattersley, a fellow Sheffielder and long-time Labour Party colleague of Blunkett.

"The fall of David Blunkett is the one occasion in my 40 years in national politics when the word has been wholly appropriate," he wrote in the Guardian newspaper.

If Prime Minister Tony Blair is looking for signs of hope in the final scenes of "The Tragedy of David Blunkett", he could do worse than to listen to Bishop Butler.

"Shakespearean tragedy always ends with the fall and the death of the great figure, but the biblical story is different," he said. "The fall isn't the end of the story but the beginning of a new story of transformation and hope.

"I hope ... this tragedy turns out to be more biblical than Shakespearean."

Blair would surely say "amen" to that.

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