

# Rose Gentle's rage

**By Susan Flockhart**  
sundayherald.com | August 29, 2004

**M**urder is an ugly word. But Rose Gentle hates euphemisms about falling on battlefields or being 'killed in action'. Two months ago in Basra, her 19-year-old son, Gordon, died when a roadside bomb exploded, and as far as Gentle is concerned, he was murdered. 'If somebody puts a bomb under John Prescott's feet and he stands on it, that's murder,' she reasons. 'It's like getting stabbed in the street.' So who is the murderer? Gentle isn't saying the Iraqis are blameless and she'd like to get her hands on whoever planted that bomb. But the bulk of her ire is directed towards the British government, who she thinks used her son as 'a bit of meat' in a conflict she describes as 'a war over oil'.

Gentle, from Pollok in Glasgow, is not an experienced polemicist. And there are those who clearly think people like her should keep out of a debate that has the potential to bring down governments on both sides of the Atlantic. Since Gentle and her 14-year-old daughter, Maxine, travelled to Downing Street to hand-deliver an angry letter, there have been mutterings about damage to military morale and suggestions that grieving relatives like the Gentles are being exploited by anti-war campaigners. Soldiers, say critics, sign up in the knowledge that they just might get killed.

But Rose Gentle is smart enough to know that things aren't that simple. 'Look out there,' she says, pointing through the window of her impeccably neat front room, 'and tell me 18-year-olds around here are aware of what's happening in wars.? In this street she reckons only three or four lads have work – as part-time school cleaners. 'That's no job for a young boy.' Before he signed up, her son was on £42 weekly benefit. After dropping into his local JobCentre last November, Gordon got talking to the chaps on the army recruitment stall. Next thing his parents knew, officers were calling at their house and driving him to the recruitment office to watch videos. Sure, Gentle and her husband, George, tried to talk him out of it. 'But he turned round and said, 'There's nothing much happening here'. All Gordon wanted was his driving licence and a trade as a mechanic. He thought, 'If I join the army, I'll get my trade, a driving licence.' He always said after he came back from Iraq, he'd have his driving licence, get a car. But he never got a chance to do any of that.'

Rose's son – known locally as the Gentle Giant because he was 6'3" and always doing odd jobs for the community – died on June 28, just weeks after he'd completed his training and

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a few hours before power was officially handed to the Iraqi government. Rose, a cleaner, was at work that day, and army officers broke the news in the back of their car. 'They told me Gordon had been killed. I asked how. They said he'd been blown up.'

You get the feeling the Gentles haven't quite got to grips with the chain of events that followed: the controversial funeral at which the war was denounced from the pulpit; Rose's petitioning to bring the troops home; the media frenzy over her visit to Downing Street. And now, the announcement that the family plans to sue the Ministry of Defence for alleged negligence.

This morning, Rose Gentle has been thinking about the young Black Watch soldier from Glenrothes who was killed in Basra on August 12, and whose mother has also called for troop withdrawal. It's the eve of Marc Ferns's funeral, and Gentle's heart goes out to his distraught family. She herself looks tired and drawn. But while her husband seems to have been choked into a grief-stricken silence, Rose Gentle can't hold back the rage that burns more fiercely every time she hears of another soldier's death.

She's mad at John Prescott, the 'arrogant man' who invited the Gentles into the Downing Street office during Tony Blair's absence, then talked so much 'rubbish' she and Maxine stormed out. She's outraged at 'con man' George Bush, and incensed by our 'halfwit' Prime Minister who was so busy 'sunshining himself' on holiday, his letter of condolence didn't arrive until seven weeks after Gordon's death. If Tony Blair really believed in this war, why didn't he encourage his own sons to get out there and fight?

Yes, Rose Gentle can rant. But mostly, she just feels desolate. There's a terrible emptiness in this house, swelling up from the floorboards and sloshing through the front door into the bare, flowerless garden that Gordon cleared ready for mono-blocking before he left for Iraq. And Gentle, who has been virtually devoured by sorrow, was stung by a recent suggestion that she should be grieving instead of politicking.

Every night she sits in her son's bedroom. The walls are decorated with dozens of the Celtic shirts that were left on the garden fence by a shocked community. His Royal Highland Fusiliers beret hangs from a hook and everywhere there are photographs: Gordon at home, cuddling his baby godson; Gordon mucking about on a camel beneath a Persian sun; Gordon in uniform, smiling.

In the saddest corner sits a small suitcase with its lid half-open and the contents bulging out as though someone had begun unpacking, but hadn't the heart to continue. An army major delivered it last Friday: all Gordon's things, including his last letter from his mother. 'Mind and dodge the bullets,' it said.

Not everything came back. There was a pair of shoes Gordon had left at the home of one of his army friends. 'That boy phoned recently and said 'Rose, I'm all dressed up for a night

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out and I'm wearing Gordon's shoes. Do you mind' I said 'No, son, you wear them and be proud.'

Gentle's voice is growing hoarse. She misses her son and 'his mad wee daft ways'. He used to come home joking, saying, 'Hey, woman of the house, get the dinner on!' He used to smile down at her, calling her his 'daft wee mam'. She still sometimes wonders if it's all a terrible dream. But since she can't seem to wake up, she channels her energy into a campaign she hopes might prevent other mothers from being dragged into a similar nightmare.

She wants longer, more extensive training for army recruits, and a minimum age of 21 for foreign-posted troops. She'd like Tony Blair to come to Pollok and talk to parents of the half-dozen locals still serving in Iraq. Perhaps then, he'll understand how unemployment, poverty and lack of hope can lead bright young people to sign up for an uncertain future.

He won't come, she says: 'We're only working-class people.' Nor does she seem hugely optimistic about her suit against the MoD, to be led by the barrister, John Cooper, who represented relatives of soldiers who died at the Deepcut barracks.

It's an ambitious campaign, and the Gentles have received support from community activists and practical assistance from her local councillor and his Scottish Socialist Party. But she refutes suggestions she's been pushed into this by bodies like Stop The War, who accompanied her to Downing Street. 'I'm doing this myself, off my own back,' she insists.

The Gentles' case rests on claims the MoD failed to provide the patrol with an electronic signal jamming device, which might have prevented Gordon's death, though Rose hints other matters will be raised at a press conference in Glasgow this Tuesday. 'I'll take this as far as I can,' she says, 'but I'll probably never be able to sue them, because they always cover up.'

Yet whatever the outcome of the legal case, the repercussions of Rose Gentle's outspoken attack on the political and military forces that led her son to war could be profound. With growing numbers of bereaved relatives in Britain and America condemning their governments' involvement in Iraq, commentators like No Logo author, Naomi Klein, predict they might actually succeed in ending their countries' involvement in that conflict.

Klein cites Michael Moore's film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, in which the grief-stricken mother of 26-year-old US war casualty Michael Lipscomb is seen outside the White House discussing his death with an anti-war activist. When a passer-by shouts that the situation is 'staged', Lila Lipscomb replies that there is nothing 'staged' about her son's death in Karbala, or her own grief. It's a powerful scene, the implications of which are uncomfortable for Blair and Bush. For it shows that however much governments dismiss opponents to the war as naive, irresponsible and unpatriotic, the raw actuality of parental grief cannot be refuted.

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Here in the UK, relatives like Rose Gentle are leading the public eye into places Tony Blair's government would rather forget: shabby streets and empty homes from which bright young people disappear into a war they don't understand.

Rose Gentle, who left school at 16 to work in a factory and has spent her life in a place scarred by poverty, is not accustomed to debating with deputy prime ministers. She can't offer a sophisticated analysis of Blair's motivations for war, except that she believes they are linked to greed, money and power. Not has she a convincing counter to the argument that withdrawing troops at this stage would result in bloodbath. ('They've handed it back [power to the Iraqis], so it's not up to them now; let them get on with it.')

The inarticulateness of rage and grief is, however, a measure of its magnitude. The bereft have no need to justify their emotions. Governments that send young soldiers to their deaths, on the other hand, are duty-bound to explain themselves. With high-profile Labour politicians like Robin Cook now calling on Tony Blair to admit he has 'learned lessons' over Iraq, it seems possible that Rose Gentle, and mothers like her, may force him to concur.

And if he cares to accept Rose's Gentle's invitation, there is much for a prime minister to learn in a small Pollok bedroom, where the Union Jack that covered a young man's coffin now sits in the corner with his un-emptied suitcase.

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*Glasgow's Sunday Herald is Scotland's leading Sunday newspaper.*