

A story of Tony Blair, the outsider turned Prime Minister and world leader

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Introduction

Anthony Charles Lynton Blair was born on May 6th, 1953, in Edinburgh, Scotland, to Leo Blair, a barrister and university lecturer whose wildest dream was to become prime minister some day and a stay-at-home mother of Irish descent.

In many ways, Mr Blair is a man of many records. He won the seat of Sedgefield in the 1983 General Election at the youthful age of thirty, while Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher posted a landslide victory for the Conservative Party and was still basking in the afterglow of the 1982 Falklands War. He garnered his own first landslide victory fourteen years later, when the New Labour Party won the 1997 General Election, leaving the Iron Lady's party in tatters, and became, at the age of 43, the youngest prime minister since Lord Liverpool in 1812. Tony Blair's youngest and fourth child, named after the prime minister's own father, was the first child born to a serving prime minister in over 150 years. The leader of New Labour will also

go down in history books as the first Labour PM ever to have served two full consecutive terms in office.

Obviously, there is a whiff of the whiz kid surrounding Mr Blair and this is bound to raise resentment from many quarters. Personal success always fuels envy, the more so when you are a high-profile personality. Tony Blair, just like Margaret Thatcher before him, has been idolised and vilified in equal measure, among the general public as well as the party faithful, both inside and outside Great Britain. But who, exactly, is Tony Blair? This will be the subject of the present paper.

To help me see through Prime Minister Blair, I shall rely mostly on a biography, *Tony Blair: the Making of a World Leader*, written in 2004 by Philip Stephens, a Financial Times columnist. I shall also refer to *The Rise of Political Lying*, an essay cum pamphlet penned by Peter Osborne, a regular contributor to the right-leaning weekly, *The Spectator*, and released a few weeks before Tony Blair's third consecutive victory in May 2005.

Part One will focus on the prime minister's childhood and formative years.

Then we shall see in Part Two how Tony Blair managed to turn the Labour Party around, how he succeeded in reconstructing the party and turning it into an election-winning machine. This is where Maurice Saatchi's essay, *The Science of Politics*, which was published in the days of the run-up to the 2001 General Election (and therefore Mr Blair's second landslide victory) will come in handy. Part Three risks being the most delicate part to write: in it, I shall try to assess whether the leader of Her Majesty's government and the moral principles underpinning and buttressing his political action have stood the test of nearly nine years in office (which is another record set by the longest-serving Labour leader in the Realm).

The making of the man

It all started with Leo, Tony Blair's father. Leo's road was bumpy from day one. His natural parents, both music hall performers, had little time to spare for the upbringing of a child. Leo was

therefore raised by a foster family in Glasgow: the Blairs. Philip Stephens notes:

He did keep one link, though, to his natural parents: his son Tony's middle names, Lynton and Charles, were borrowed from Leo's natural father – one was the music hall performer's given name, the other his stage name. (p. 2)

Leo's environment was grim and grimy, the tenement blocks of Scotland's first industrial city. Forced to leave school at the age of fourteen, he got a job as a clerk. Then World War Two came and Leo joined the Army, where he quickly became an officer. After the war, he returned to full-time education, read Law and became a barrister and an academic. In the latter capacity, he was offered a lecturer's position at the University of Adelaide, in Australia, where he moved with his wife and three children. In 1958, they moved back to Durham, North-East England, where Leo Blair went on lecturing and where his career as a lawyer blossomed.

Like many who have learnt life the hard way, Leo Blair was determined his children should have a smoother ride. As a result, he sent his two sons, William, the elder, and Tony, the younger, to Durham Chorister School, which Tony attended from the age of eight. Philip Stephens says:

[The school] had been founded several centuries earlier to educate the boys who sang in the city's ancient cathedral choir. In the 1950s, the traditions of the church still lived on, but it had a broader intake, serving as one of the quintessentially English preparatory or "prep" schools, to which the middle classes sent their children to begin a formal education. (p. 3)

"Education, education, education"

There, in the prime minister's own words "the premium was on good manners". What mattered was "respect for others, courtesy, giving up your seat for the elderly, saying please and then thank you." (Stephens, p. 4)

All those civilized values were reinforced by his parents, not least Hazel, his mother, and they stood the test of time, Stephens seems to argue, when he writes:

The young politician made his way in the Labour Party as a "modernizer", a leader eager to discard the past. But his personal manners, almost Victorian in their studied politeness, harked back to gentler times. Whatever his faults, Blair is an unfailingly courteous politician. (p. 4)

A few weeks after the English national football team had reached its climax at Wembley Stadium, beating West Germany 4-2 in a breathtaking final to snatch the Jules Rimet Trophy, Tony Blair, as for him, reached his nadir. His father sent him to Fettes College, Scotland's most prominent public school, on the outskirts of Edinburgh, the administrative and political capital. Stephens states:

Fettes was established in 1870 as a boarding school for Scotland's rich merchant classes. The school's founding ambition was to produce the educated young men who would go out into the world in pursuit of the nation's commercial fortunes and in service of the British Empire. It was organized from the start on the English public school principle that said rigorous discipline and austerity would build what the English call "character" in the children of the wealthy. (p. 4)

For five years, the young Blair had to bear "Fettes's petty regulations and archaic ordinances."

He left at the age of eighteen with ... a reputation among the school's masters as a rebel ... Yet Fettes had left its mark. Later, friends and acquaintances would comment that Blair showed in later life the very respect for authority against which he had rebelled at school. (p. 5)

Acting was the one thing Tony Blair liked at Fettes. One of his teachers, Eric Anderson – who was to become headmaster of Eton, England's top public school – had urged

Blair to "channel his rebellious energy into school drama". Blair soon excelled at that.

Another of Blair's traits which is a legacy of his days at Fettes College is "the meticulous care [he] takes with his personal appearance". One close adviser remarked: "He's a politician who can't pass a mirror without looking into it." (Stephens, p. 7) Stephens himself adds: "Vanity no doubt plays its part, and the performer still has a starring role in Blair's political persona."

His thespian brilliance resurfaced in an awesome fashion when he delivered the "People's Princess" speech to a televised audience of millions of Britons on the last Sunday of August 1997, just a few hours after Princess Diana died in that ghastly car-crash on the Seine embankment in Paris, France:

The words were perfectly delivered, the voice breaking at precisely the right moment, the grief etched on the prime minister's face. (...) To the nation it seemed that this lament for "the People's Princess" was as real as her sudden death had been incredible. The initial reaction of the Queen and Prince Charles ... had been cold and distant, and it was left to the prime minister to speak for the nation at a time of tragedy. At Diana's funeral at Westminster Abbey ..., Blair delivered the famous passage from Corinthians – "When I was a child, I spoke like a child" – with the same emotional intensity. Within weeks his personal rating had soared off the opinion pollsters' scales. (p. 7-8)

In 1972, Blair enrolled at Saint John's College at Oxford. The university, Stephens highlights, "was scarcely a hotbed of student revolution [and] cannabis was cheap and ubiquitous. Most of Blair's crowd smoked it." (p. 9) Tony Blair, however, ever since he was chosen to lead Labour in 1994, has been adamant he had never ever tried smoking a joint, let alone "Bogart it". Stephens notes an interesting point about that hard-headed denial stance:

More interesting, perhaps, than whether Blair had actually experimented with cannabis was the concern that not even the smallest transgression should be allowed to sully his record. (p. 9)

Though Blair was a dedicated student, like his father and brother before him, he nonetheless managed, in line with his love of the stage, to become the lead singer and guitarist in a rock band, Ugly Rumours, that, as you may be aware, has never made it to the Rock'n' Roll Hall of Fame. This said, "the band became part of the official narrative of the Labour leader's early life. A rock-star youth fitted the image of a rising young politician." (Stephens, p. 10)

The roots of Tony Blair's political outlook

Prime Minister Blair is a believer. He believes in the family, in God and in a certain number of intellectual notions and political principles.

Family values

One of Mr Blair's most cherished values is no doubt the family, in a double sense: the family he grew up in and the family he started.

The reader has already understood that the education Leo Blair insisted his children should have was likely to give them the moral backbone and a value system that would help them move up the social ladder.

Today, Durham is still a quaint little town lying in awe of its formidable cathedral – one of the most wonderful monuments of its kind in Great Britain, as American writer Bill Bryson rightly remarked in *Notes from a Small Island* – perched on one of the town's hills. Walking up that hill to the cathedral on the cobblestone paving is a throwback to Victorian England. Chances are that the Durham Tony Blair grew up in in the late Fifties and the Sixties was only slightly different from what it had been a century earlier and from what it is today (at least as regards the older central part): Any visitor is likely

to sense the timeless quality of the cathedral and its immediate surroundings. Time stands still there and my guess is that this is bound to leave its mark on any sensitive, decent person, including future prime ministers.

However much Leo Blair may have wanted to bring up his children in a protective and morally rigorous environment, he could not control Fate, his own fate to start with. At the age of forty, he found himself courting death and bedridden for months after a sudden stroke. Tony Blair later said that that was "the day [his] childhood ended" and he was only eleven then.

In a speech to the party's annual conference, he once declared that his father's illness had "taught [him] the value of the family, because [his] mother worked for three years to help him walk and talk again". This fateful event also taught Tony Blair a lesson about friendship: "the real friends ... stuck with us for no other reason than that it was the right thing to do." And, he added as a coda to the same speech:

I don't pretend to you that I had a deprived childhood. I didn't. But I learned a sense of values in my childhood. (Stephens, p. 13)

His father recovered, went back to work, but had to give up the ambitions he had nursed of having a national career in the Conservative Party, of which he had been a member since his days in the military.

Another eleven years elapsed, leaving the young Tony time to complete his education at Oxford, when Fate delivered him a second devastating blow: his mother was diagnosed with cancer of the thyroid and was soon to die. After Tony Blair became PM, his elder brother, William, told a newspaper:

The effect of our father's stroke on Tony has often been analysed. Many people say the ambition of the father was transferred to the son. But it was more complicated than that ... I think people have tended to underestimate the role my

mother played in forming Tony's view of life. (Stephens, p. 14)

As for the family he established in 1980 when he married Cherie Booth, Tony Blair has always been known to spare time for them, rushing back to their Islington home after Parliamentary assignments rather than hanging around the Westminster bars and restaurants to plot and plan as many MPs are wont to do.

Tony Blair's faith, philosophy and political ideas

Tony Blair, whose father was an agnostic turned atheist after his first wife's demise, found God at Oxford.

At university, he had been part of a group in which everyone, to some extent, was interested in religion as well as politics. "It was really an awakening of ideas", he stated later. According to Stephens, "the loss of his mother gave Blair the determination to succeed; Christianity was becoming a motive force in his life." (p. 15) Some people close to him have pinpointed "the fusion of moral conviction and burning ambition that put the young man on the path to the premiership." To Stephens, it seems obvious that

Blair's subsequent political career was built on the foundations of his religious faith and family. (p. 15)

Among the Oxford group, Peter Thomson was a particular source of inspiration and guidance to all. He was older than the rest (in his mid-thirties), Australian and a priest. He also had a social conscience: "His brand of Christianity was at odds with the incense-burning High Anglicanism of Saint John's". (Stephens, p. 17)

Stephens expands:

Thomson's view of Christianity was not drawn from the arcane abstraction of learned theologians. Rather, he saw a faith demanding action to improve the human condition as well as a spiritual relationship with God. (p. 17)

This smacked of the "Liberation Theology" of the Latin American

Jesuit missionaries of the day. Thomson, however, was not versed in Marx, but rather in John Macmurray, a twentieth century Scottish philosopher and university lecturer. It is in Macmurray's books that he found "the connections between politics, philosophy and theology."

Macmurray had taught in London and Edinburgh in the 1930s and 1940s and written a few books. His key concept was that of "community", "the belief that individual self-realization depends on partnership with and trust of others." (Stephens, p. 18) According to him, "societies are not defined by the individuals within them"; just the opposite is true: individuals are "shaped by their relationships with others in the communities in which they grow up." The family is the cornerstone of this model, "laying the foundation for the wider networks on which strong societies depend." Such a view became central to Tony Blair's political message.

Talking to an interviewer in 1994, the year when he was chosen to lead the party, he said:

If you really want to understand what I'm all about, you have to take a look at a guy called John Macmurray. It's all there. (Stephens, p. 18)

Getting back to the same subject in the summer of 2003, after the War in Iraq had officially come to a close, he added:

Macmurray's work was a powerful influence on me because it seemed to make sense of the need to involve the individual in society without the individual being subsumed in society. This is really, I think, the struggle the political left has been engaged in – how you retain the sense of solidarity without that becoming the collectivisation of society. And so that concept struck me at the time as the right concept politically, as well as theologically. (Stephens, p.18)

This is the dilemma with which his political models, William Gladstone (1809-1898) and David Lloyd George (1863-1945), both Liberal PMs, "had wrestled – how to set the individual free to realize his poten-

tial while extending opportunity to the weak and the disadvantaged. The answer had been found by David Lloyd George, the founder of the welfare state in the first decade of the twentieth century. If the Gladstonian impulse was ever present in his foreign policy, Blair's domestic agenda owed a debt to Lloyd George." (Stephens, p. 18)

Asked to contribute to a book initiated by John Smith, the then Labour leader who died suddenly of a stroke in 1994, Tony Blair wrote an essay on the synthesis of faith and politics in 1993. Though he started by saying that, to him, Christianity, Islam and Judaism all deserved "parity of esteem", he nonetheless argued that "at its best, Christianity had inspired people for almost two thousand years to work for a more just and humane world." In line with Macmurray, he stated that the Christian faith was about "the union between individual and community". It contained the belief that "we are not stranded in helpless isolation, but we owe a duty both to others and to ourselves." The message of Christ was that individuals prospered through communion with others: "The act of Holy Communion is symbolic of this message. It acknowledges that we do not grow up in total independence, but interdependently." His conclusion was that Labour values were "closely intertwined with those of Christianity."

His article obviously struck a new chord in a predominantly secular movement like Labour:

By championing the idea of moral absolutes, he also challenged the prevailing orthodoxy of the left. Thirty years earlier the social revolution of the 1960s had elbowed aside universal ethical judgments in favour of individual choice, a libertarianism that had carried through the 1970s and 1980s. Blair judged the tide of moral relativism had flowed too fast and too far, and that society now needed to rediscover its bearings. (Stephens, p. 19-20)

To his credit, Mr Blair managed to turn the situation around in this re-

spect. Mr and Mrs Average Briton had seen Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives as the party of family values and at the same time Labour as "a torchbearer for those who chose ...an alternative lifestyle, [like] gays, single mothers" for instance. By beaming messages like "It is largely from family discipline that social discipline and a sense of responsibility is learned", Blair made Labour palatable to many citizens of Middle Britain, "who on issues like the family, social disorder, and crime were conservative with a small 'c'." (Stephens, p. 21)

The remaking of the party: from Old Labour to New Labour ■

Part One will have shown, or so I hope, that Tony Blair was not, out of education and inclination, your run-of-the-mill Labour activist:

Blair would never be a member of the Labour "tribe". He was separated from his peers by more than a privileged childhood. (Stephens, p. 44)

When at Oxford, and contrary to what many students used to do, he joined neither the Labour club nor the Conservative one. But more than this, "there was a wider cultural chasm, which ... he had marked out in his maiden speech in the House of Commons in July 1983." (Stephens, p. 44)

His was the position of the outsider:

I am a socialist not through reading a textbook that caught my intellectual fancy, nor through unthinking tradition.

Joining the party had been a matter of sharing the fundamental values of Labour – "cooperation not confrontation, fellowship in place of fear." (Stephens, p. 44)

However, "Blair was badly read in Labour history; his political icons were William Gladstone, Lloyd

George, William Beveridge, and other heroes of the once-powerful Liberal Party.” (Stephens, p. 44) Furthermore, as we have seen previously, his evenings as an MP were spent in the company of friends and family and many of those friends, even though they were connected with politics, “also had a life beyond it.”

All this was to be credited to Blair’s account when the time came, in 1994, to choose a new leader. Many of the Labour MPs that voted for him claimed they had done so because “one of his great strengths was that he was a politician with a hinterland, someone with a life beyond the corridors of Westminster.” And Stephens concludes:

The image of the young man in denim jeans and casual shirt sitting with his family at the kitchen table at home in the fashionable London district of Islington was just what they wanted. Blair’s electoral appeal was to a nation that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, had lost interest in the old ideology. It no longer wanted leaders obsessed with politics. (p. 45)

The merit is not only Blair’s but Neil Kinnock’s. This Welshman headed the Labour party from 1983 to 1992, that is he steered it through almost a decade of political wilderness. For Labour was very unpopular then. The reason for this was a faction — which the tabloid press had nicknamed “the Loony Left” — that had extreme views, like unilateral nuclear disarmament, seceding from Europe, renationalization of newly-privatized utilities and industries, etc. Kinnock was intelligent enough to realize that the time had come for reform, if the party were not to be sidelined for aeons. To help him in this effort, Kinnock needed up-and-coming young MPs like Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The media were predominantly anti-Labour: Blair’s telegenic looks and plastic grin came to the rescue. The future prime minister never missed a chance of ingratiating himself with journalists. Perception was the key and Kinnock and his

young Turks had perfectly understood this, as we shall now see.

The Blair recipe for winning

Winning an election, Maurice Saatchi claims, is mainly a matter of perception:

Outside Newton’s universe, where physical laws govern reality, the world is conditioned by perception. And perception is conditioned by the distorting factors of society, genetics, class, upbringing, and the conscious or unconscious interests of the perceiver. (Saatchi, p. 2)

The trouble with perception, Saatchi goes on, is that it cannot be relied upon:

Once we describe what we perceive in terms of what we feel or believe ... then error, doubt and uncertainty come to the fore. (p. 3)

The problem of perception Blair had to face was the following: in Britain, the Left was traditionally seen as ‘caring but incompetent’, while the Right was regarded as ‘efficient and cruel’. Labour would win again, Blair and associates reasoned, when this perception was radically altered, when the tables were turned, i.e. when the Left could be regarded as ‘caring and competent’ and the Right ‘cruel and incompetent’.

Saatchi clearly and convincingly sums up the situation in the following way:

Messrs Blair, Brown, Mendelson, Campbell and their researcher Philip Gould made a mathematical calculation: to eliminate the negatives associated with their party, neutralize the positives associated with their opponent, and thus end a run of four election defeats in a row. With a cold clear eye, they analysed the weaknesses in their position, ‘the damning reasons given for not voting Labour’. They removed them one by one. And declared themselves a ‘new party’. ‘New’, for them, was a one-word strategy. ‘New’ meant ‘not old’. ‘Old’ was bad, dangerous. So ‘new’ must be good, safe. That was it.

No wonder Mr Blair ‘grabbed the idea with both hands’. As Mr Gould says, ‘the fact that Labour had become New Labour gave people the confidence to make the change.’

And it worked. By the time of the last election of the twentieth century [1997], polls showed that seventy-two per cent of the British public agreed that ‘New Labour deserves to be called new’, and that ‘A man should not be condemned for a sincere conversion’. Labour’s rationalist triumph was complete.

How did they do it? (Saatchi, p. 9-10)

To Saatchi, the answer is straightforward. If Labour came back to power, it is because the party passed four tests: the economic test, the ‘centrist’ test, the modernity test and the European integration test.

The economic test

It was the fourth Labour election defeat in a row, in 1992, after a Tory campaign totally focused on economics and tax, that made Labour finally give up socialism, reform themselves into new Labour, and copy the cut of Conservative economic cloth. (Saatchi, p. 10)

With the Conservatives’ four consecutive election victories a concept had become established in voters’ minds. The Conservatives were ‘efficient and cruel’. This means that although Conservatives wore bankers’ top-hats and tails, they knew how to look after your money. Labour was ‘caring but incompetent’. This meant that although Labour were full of anguish, they did not know how to look after your money. But by May 1997 the double drama of Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) exit and Blair’s entrance had turned this happy mechanism into a devastating vice for the Conservative Party.

Voters displayed textbook reasoning: ‘The Conservatives have run the economy badly (ERM exit, tax rises). And even if they could convince me they have run the economy well (low unemployment, low inflation, etc.), Labour will not ruin it (new, re-

formed).’ So, by 1997, the Conservatives were seen as ‘inefficient and cruel’. And Labour were ‘caring and competent’. (Saatchi, p. 11)

Concerning the 1979-1992 period, when Labour posted defeat after defeat, Saatchi highlights an interesting point. When asked to choose ‘the most important issues facing the country’, the voters invariably chose the ‘caring’ issues, like health, education and unemployment. On each of those issues, Labour had systematically a comfortable rating advantage over the Tories, and yet they lost. To Saatchi, it only goes to show the electorate was ‘rational and acted in its own self-interest’:

In all exit polls prior to 1997 the number-one ‘reason for not voting Labour’ was ‘My taxes would go up and I would not have very much to show for it.’ Therefore, it was logical not to vote Labour. (p. 13)

So what had changed in 1997? To Saatchi, the answer to one pollsters’ question had radically changed and made a world of a difference. The question was: ‘With Britain in economic difficulties which party has the best policies for managing the economy?’ From 1992 to 1997, “there was a forty point turn-around against the Conservatives, from +20 to -20, in answer to that question. Considering that on all other dimensions the ‘ratings of the parties stayed the same’, Saatchi logically concludes that

The only thing that changed between victory and defeat was the perception of the parties’ relative economic competence. (p. 14)

The ‘centrist’ test

The political perception also mattered. One of the first symbolic gestures of the newly-elected Labour leader in 1994 was to scrap Clause Four of the original Constitution of the Labour Party. Clause Four provided that, when Labour was in power, it should nationalise the means of production, that is bring industry under State control. ‘Scrap’ is not the accurate term, however, since Clause Four has been rewrit-

ten and emptied of its radical contents. The new version reads:

The Labour Party is a democratic socialist party. It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone, so as to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many, not the few. Where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe. And where we live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect. (to be found at <http://www.labour.org.uk/aboutlabour>)

The least we can say is that the new wording is quite innocuous, not likely to offend anyone, except of course the staunch supporters of Old Labour!

As Stephens shows, New Labour learnt a lot from Bill Clinton’s New Democrats (cf. Chapter Four: New Democrats, New Labour). Indeed, the Blair crowd travelled extensively to Washington, D.C., from 1994 to 1997, to develop their own version of the ‘American Way’, the famous “Third Way”:

The Third Way was ‘Beyond left and Right’. We all knew that old-style socialism was dead because it led to economic chaos. So, we were told, would old-style capitalism. Because it leads to cruel global markets whose brute force is beyond the control of governments or countries. At a stroke, Conservatives were to be consigned to the same intellectual dustbin of history as communism and Marxism.

Some Tory critics said the Third Way was an empty phrase. But they were the same Tories who dismissed New Labour as an empty phrase. Others said the Third Way was just an intellectual edifice to justify one more theft of Conservative clothes – this time of the fine old Tory virtue of pragmatism. But they were the Tories who actually helped New Labour by telling everyone it was a copy of Conservatism. Others said it was just a splitting of the dif-

ference between measures for a strong economy and measures for social justice: a lowering of the temperature; a compromise.

In fact, one of Baroness Thatcher’s greatest attributes was her ability to spot an intellectual with an idea and at once see its political potential. That is what Labour was doing with Professor Giddens’s idea of the Third Way. (Saatchi, p. 15)

At a conference at the New York University Law School in 1999, President Clinton and Prime Minister Blair got together to express their views about the Centre-Left movement of which they are part. They claimed they were in favour of ‘activist Government but highly disciplined’. Saatchi goes on:

So they spoke of prudent finance, fiscal responsibility. They spoke of competition, choice and flexibility in public services so that investment in them will pay off, of competition in the education system ... They said that the market economy was fundamental, but rejected Right-wing neo-liberals who said government should shrink, get out of the way and then all would be well. That assumed, they said, that markets are always more intelligent than governments ... They spoke of this as the driving platform for the twenty-first century ... (p. 16)

And Saatchi concludes on that point by saying that all that Clinton and Blair had said during that conference had been dismissed by some Tories ‘as the usual hopes and dreams’. But, he argues, dreams are important: “People give credit to someone who has his heart in the right place (...). Labour was determined to modernize its appeal to the heart, away from the old idea of equality at any price and the class struggle, to a more realistic and acceptable version.” (p. 16).

The modernist test

Labour could win if it also managed to change the political lexicon. Perception was also a matter of projecting the right image of the party and its leader by using the right vocabu-

lary and steering the general public towards a New Labour vote. This could be done by hammering the same message again and again and persuading voters that, indeed, Labour was no longer the dusty party with stuffy ideas. This should remind you of Hayek's views on word manipulation and propaganda, as summarised by this author in the previous issue (*Référence* n°39, dated December 2005, on page 52) of your favourite magazine. Modernity became a key concept in this respect, if not a battle cry. Saatchi notes that in the last Queen's Speech of the twentieth century, "the words 'modernization', 'new', 'reform' and 'change' were used seventeen times – almost one a minute." (p. 17)

All the reforms initiated by the Blair governments since 1997 are attempts at materializing that will to modernize British society. But Blair's effort at "putting a new spin on things" and positioning himself as a "modernizer" had started a decade earlier, when Kinnock gave him the position of minister for industry in his shadow government.

In those days, Prime Minister Thatcher was privatising utilities (i.e. the companies in charge of providing people with useful services, like electricity, water and public transport to name the most prominent such services). Unlike Labour politicians before him, who traditionally took sides with the unions, i.e. the producers, on such issues, Blair took a new tack by expressing concern over the likely price increases that such privatisations might entail. In other words, he spoke in Parliament on this issue as an advocate of the consumers, which was a novel stance for a Labour MP.

The European integration test

Both Stephens and Saatchi agree that, if the Conservatives bit the dust in 1997, this was partly due to their inability to reach a consensus on Europe and the prospect of a European currency. Under John Major, two factions fought with each other within the party: the one pro-business and

therefore favourable to Britain signing up to the Euro, the other keepers of the trappings of Tory ideology, who saw in Euroland a menace to national identity and sovereignty.

Labour avoided so internecine a strife, put up a united front and took a middle-of-the-road stance — the wait-and-see policy — which reassured the voters. In office, this policy was to be confirmed by Chancellor Brown's announcement that final decision on joining the Eurozone would depend on the country meeting five economic tests, which was a subtle way of avoiding the issue and postponing it to some elusive future. This could seem shocking and irresponsible if, as Saatchi says, it did not reflect the opinion of a majority of Britons:

They [British people] understood very well that there are certain things in life you don't want, but to which you have to bow your head. They knew you have to bow your head to death, to illness, to failure, or, perhaps, to the march of history. And they may have been reasoning that this Euro was something they didn't want but which they knew they would just have to accept. (Saatchi, p. 20)

All this adds up, Saatchi argues, to demonstrate that Labour was bound to win in 1997.

Tony Blair in Government ■

The Dawn of a New Age?

Fate had it that Voting Day was also Labour Day (May 1st) in 1997. British voters gave New Labour a clear mandate to do up the country in expectation of the approaching 21st century. The Conservatives suffered their worst defeat in over 150 years, with a mere 165 seats, while New Labour grabbed the lion's share of the 659-seat House of Commons (419): "this was more than a change of government. The country felt like a different place. Britain had a government it could trust." (Stephens, p. 80)

In truth, the scale of New Labour's victory was as much a verdict on the dismal condition of the Conservatives as it was an endorsement of Blair's New Labour project. John Major's government had been broken by the civil war that raged within it over the question of Europe. A series of financial scandals that would see one cabinet member sent to prison [Jeffrey Archer, jailed for four years in 2001 for having lied in a libel case] had buried it in sleaze. While the British economy had actually prospered in the two or three years preceding the election, the Conservatives were not given credit for the achievement. The government had never recovered its credibility after its defeat at the hands of the currency speculators on Black Wednesday in September 1992. (Stephens, p. 81)

Standing at the front door of 10 Downing Street on May 2nd, the newly elected prime minister declared:

We ran for office as New Labour. We will govern as New Labour. New Labour is the party of One Nation.

"One Nation" is a political slogan originally coined by the Victorian Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, Gladstone's archrival. Disraeli meant by this that the Conservatives would hold on to power only if they "built a society which offered hope to the poor as well as advantage to the wealthy." By using the slogan, Blair meant to play up the "prevailing mood of national unity". Furthermore, Saatchi would say, talking about One-Nation Britain was just another example of Blair "copying the cut of the Conservative cloth".

New Labour's policy would be an inclusive one: "My vision for New Labour is to become, as the Liberal Party was in the nineteenth century, a broad coalition of those who believe in progress and justice", Blair said during the summer of 1998.

Many saw Blair's victory as the triumph of modernity: Labour was the future and the Tories the past. "Cool Britannia", an expression originally used by Newsweek, the American

magazine, became trendy and reflected Blair's intention to "marginalize those on the right of politics just as surely as Margaret Thatcher had made outcasts of the left". (Stephens, p. 85)

Inside 10 Downing Street, there were visible signs of a "regime change". Parties were organized, attended by a new breed of guests that had never been invited there before, like football stars, singers, actors and writers alongside the usual official guests gracing the prime minister's residence with their presence. Some talked of a new court of Camelot, thereby putting Blair on a par with King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

Even the way business was carried out changed:

John Major had chosen ... to work in the cabinet room, a grand book-lined chamber overlooking the garden, [with a] large boat-shaped table around which senior ministers will gather for the weekly meeting of the cabinet. (Stephens, p. 86)

Blair, instead, chose a more humble adjoining room, marking that the style of government would be more relaxed.

But the modest room – the prime minister's "den", it was called – also conveyed a more substantive message. Decisions in the new administration would not be taken by the broad collective of senior ministers represented in the cabinet. Instead, policy would be made by the small number of colleagues and close advisers who could squeeze into the prime minister's room. Senior ministers soon discovered that the politics of inclusiveness did not extend to Downing Street's inner sanctum. (Stephens, p. 87)

Stephens adds:

Though New Labour's promise to the public had been to build a Britain in which power and opportunity belonged to "the many, not the few", in Blair's government they were reserved for the few. (p. 88)

Prominent among the few stood Alastair Campbell, Blair's press

secretary and media adviser (or favourite "spin doctor", critics of Blair would contend), who

was, on the face of it, the very antithesis of the man he served. Everything about him seemed an affront to Tony Blair's Victorian social mores. A recovered alcoholic who had once written for a soft-core pornographic magazine, Campbell came from ... the tabloid press. He was also godless. As for honouring the family, he had never seen a reason to marry his long-term partner, Fiona Millar, even after the couple had children. His choice of words was colourfully Anglo-Saxon ... Yet Campbell was closer to Blair than anyone. (Stephens, p. 91-92)

This said, two other people wielded considerable influence in Blair's "inner sanctum". They were Anji Hunter and Jonathan Powell. Together with Campbell, they formed the "magic circle" a.k.a. the "troika of intimates".

Anji Hunter had first met Blair when he was at Fettes College. Born in Malaysia to a Scottish rubber plantation manager, she was, like Blair, an outsider in the Labour party, on account of her upper-middle-class background. In Downing Street, she was an adviser and problem-fixer, "a finger on the pulse of Middle Britain, a role in which she served as a political counterweight to Blair's wife" (Stephens, p. 92), bringing Blair back to centre stage when Cherie was "pulling him to the left".

Jonathan Powell was the intellectual of the trio:

A former diplomat, Powell was publicly self-effacing, preferring the shadows to the limelight. He shared Blair's public school and Oxford background and had joined the Labour Party only ... in 1993. Powell's task was to plug the Blair premiership into the wider government machine ... His strong Atlanticism and his equally powerful conviction that Britain must come to terms with its European partners had a profound influence on Blair's foreign policy. (Stephens, p. 93)

However different from one another those three aides may have been, they had one point in common: total devotion to their leader:

When the government sailed into the murkier waters of politics... their first reaction was always to protect the prime minister. Whatever had passed in the government's name could not be allowed to tarnish Tony Blair personally. (Stephens, p. 93)

The trio worked mostly backstage, even though Campbell found himself, unwittingly and unwillingly, quite a few times in the limelight. If we had more space, it would be interesting to focus on two other essential players in the Blair team, Gordon Brown and Peter Mendelson, the one a master of economic policy-making, the other a superb (critics would say crafty) campaign tactician and strategist. Suffice it to say that the five-some formed the Dream Team that Tony Blair coached.

Blair's achievements since 1997

Before considering Peter Osborne's harshly critical views about New Labour, a sense of balance leads me to pause for a while and briefly survey what has been achieved by Tony Blair and his governments since May 1997.

The list of achievements for the first term in office (1997-2001) is impressive:

- Granting the Bank of England its independence,
- Reform of the House of Lords (still in progress today!)
- Devolution of power to Scotland and rebirth of the Scottish Parliament
- Establishment of the Welsh Assembly, vested with devolved powers as well
- Making peace in Northern Ireland (Good Friday Agreement, April 10th, 1998)
- A £42-billion investment programme in the key areas of health and education.

If domestic issues dominated the agenda for the first term, foreign policy issues came to the fore during

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the second term (2001-2005). Prominent in this respect is Britain's participation, as closest ally, in the Washington-led War on Terror since 9/11.

British troops have been involved in four armed conflicts since 1997: Kosovo (1999), Sierra Leone (2000), Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Despite the controversy generated by British participation, especially in Iraq, the general public took pride in their troops who displayed their usual skill and professionalism.

The prime minister's official website (<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page4.asp>) sums up the agenda for the third term in one word: "respect", and quotes Mr Blair's determination to bring back "a proper sense of respect in our schools, in our communities, in our towns and villages."

Lastly, under the steady guidance of Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer since Day One, Britain has posted economic results – not least among them an unemployment rate stabilised under five per cent – which should make us, French people, green with envy rather than hot under the collar.

This said, the prime minister's major liability may have become, as of today, the question of trust, or more precisely the lack of it.

For about five years between 1992 – when John Smith took over from Neil Kinnock after the latter's defeat to John Major – and 1997, Labour and New Labour kept arguing that Major's Tories were rotten, that sleaze, i.e. corruption, and mendacity, i.e. lying, stalked the land. Said differently, Major's days in office corresponded to the last daze of Thatcherism and "things could only get better" were Labour to be voted in.

To crown it all, Tony Blair came to be perceived – remember, it is all a matter of perception – as a morally superior, if not self-righteous, being, one that would cleanse the country of the Conservatives' base mores. If the U.K. chose him to lead the realm, there would be a return to Gladstonian ethics. Political

morality would be the government's constant obsession, a stance that was mirrored by the declarations made by candidate Blair on the campaign trail in 1997, like:

The Conservatives' broken promises taint all politics. That is why we have made our guiding rule not to promise what we cannot deliver, and to deliver what we promise. (quoted by William Rees-Moog in *The Spectator*, April 30th, 2005)

The return of Labour to power would signal the advent of Mr Clean.

Peter Osborne's charge

In *The Rise of Political Lying*, Peter Osborne alleges that the central lie of the Blair administration is that the New Labour government is averse to lying and exceptionally truthful, when indeed it uses deception as standard business method. Osborne traces this back to Neil Kinnock's days, not because Mr Kinnock himself was a liar – he was honest, like Michael Foot (1979-1983) before him and John Smith (1992-1994) after him – but because of the way the Press and media treated him.

Actually, the predominantly Conservative Press systematically demonised Kinnock. After some time as leader of Labour, Kinnock contended that the tabloid Press, his remarks ripped out of context and used against him, constantly misrepresented his views. The situation had festered so much that he came to refuse to talk to most journalists.

As a result, when John Smith took over from Kinnock in 1992, Labour found itself divided over the attitude to adopt towards the Press. Smith "despised the media", but believed that Labour should soldier on, hoping that one day the general public would see through the media bias and would give Labour a fair hearing.

"A second group shared all of John Smith's contempt for the media, but rejected his conclusion", Osborne states on page 34. They thought Smith's refusal to come to grips with the Press was tantamount to a "dereliction of duty":

Hardened and embittered by the experience of the Kinnock years, these critics of John Smith saw the media as the roadblock which the Labour Party must clear if it was ever to escape from opposition. This group was New Labour... (p. 35)

The members of that faction – Blair, Brown, Mendelson, Campbell, Charles Clark, Patricia Hewitt and Philip Gould – had all emerged as Party hopefuls under Kinnock. They felt that "political power could never be secured in Britain until the press had been appeased". (p. 35)

Mendelson declared:

Of course we want to use the media, but the media will be our tools, our servants; we are no longer content to let them be our persecutors. (Osborne, p. 35)

The aim was to woo the Press and the target was reached with a vengeance. However, after winning over the Press,

New Labour retained every last ounce of its original contempt for the right-wing press... Following in the footsteps of the philosopher Grotius [1583-1645], New Labour concluded that it was permissible to make misleading statements to those who could not be trusted to tell the truth. (Osborne, p. 36)

New Labour campaigned in 1997 claiming it would not make promises it could not keep. That was hot air, Osborne alleges, quoting two well-known examples: university tuition fees and tax hikes.

Concerning the former, Osborne notes: "Just before the election Labour was emphatic in ruling out university tuition fees. Tony Blair declared that 'Labour has no plans to introduce tuition fees for higher education.'" (Osborne, p. 37) A year later the Teaching and Higher Education Act brought in tuition fees of £ 1,000. The same deceptive tactic was used during Blair's second term (2001-2005) when the highly-controversial "top-up" fees were introduced in 2004, whereas the Labour manifesto of 2001 had claimed: "We will not introduce

“top-up” fees and have legislated to prevent them.’ (Osborne, p. 38)

As for the tax increases, Blair offered repeated assurances in the two years preceding Labour’s return to power, Osborne argues, with quite a few quotes to prove his point, but:

These claims, designed to establish Labour as the party of low taxation, were hollow. By 2004, voters had been clobbered by scores of tax increases, ranging from stamp duty to fuel, with taxation up by approaching \$5,000 for every household in the UK. (p. 39)

This is proof, Osborne contends, of “the deep, inbuilt terror of candour and systemic preference for deceit that is New Labour’s most singular and most defining characteristic.” (p. 46)

However, “in a properly functioning liberal democracy there should be no call for the mendacity advocated by Plato [in *The Republic* with the “noble lie” theory] or Machiavelli [in *The Prince*],” (p. 119) the reason for that being that

The right to vote implies a liberty that extends far beyond the entitlement to mark a piece of paper in a voting booth once every four or five years. Citizens have a right to form a fair and balanced judgement, and are therefore entitled to be informed about their political choices. This includes a right not to be deceived. (Osborne, p. 120)

This stated, the problem of mendacity is also defined in terms of the Left-Right divide:

Like many movements from the Left, New Labour cherishes a special sense of its own virtue. Its politicians and activists genuinely believe that they are working for the greater good. Lies, frauds and deceit are purely altruistic. This means that the Left’s attitude towards dissimulation is very different to the traditional Right. (Osborne, p. 131)

The Right, according to Osborne, “takes a gloomy view of human nature and interprets it as hopelessly flawed and limited.” (p. 131) That is why the Right firmly believes in tra-

ditions, rules, institutions and morality, which are the only means available to “prevent humanity from doing acts of great harm.” (p. 131)

The Left takes a wider and more generous view. It believes in the noble possibilities of human nature and has always looked with a friendly eye on tremendous schemes for the rearrangement of society... It feels impatient with institutions, conventions and moral codes that stand in the way of virtuous change. Both Left and Right believe in achieving what they see as the general good: they simply have contradictory ways of going about it. (p. 132)

To the Left, falsehood can be excused provided the motive is pure:

What does the small sin of telling a lie in an election campaign matter when set beside the benefits in terms of better hospitals, better schools and the more generous society that will naturally follow if New Labour wins the election? Lies are easily forgiven if they are told for the right reasons and in good faith. (p. 132)

A good case in point is Blair claiming that the failure to find WMD (weapons of mass destruction) in

Iraq was almost immaterial since Saddam Hussein had been toppled. Osborne observes:

*The fact that the British government had cited the existence of WMD as **casus belli** was neither here nor there: the greater good had been achieved. This carelessness about detail is characteristic of a strand of the liberal Left, to which Tony Blair is a broad adherent. (p. 135)*

He adds:

*It is not unreasonable to speculate that the prime minister has a strong tendency to fall victim to a common conceptual muddle: the failure to understand the distinction between truth vs **falsehood** and truth and **error**. Tony Blair, and many of his colleagues, consistently seem to feel that they are lucky enough to have been granted a privileged access to the **moral** truth. This state of grace produces two marvellous consequences. It means that whatever New Labour ministers say or write, however misleading or inaccurate, is in a larger sense true. Likewise whatever their opponents say or write, whether or not strictly speaking accurate, is in the most profound sense false. (p. 135)*

Conclusion ■

How does this all add up? I had set about solving the Blair riddle only to come to the conclusion that I am hardly any wiser in the end. Instead of answering my initial question, I would rather ask more questions. Has political life become nothing more than a shadow theatre, in which politicians are well-trained puppeteers, expert at the art of pulling the strings to bend the dolls this way or that? Is Mr Blair just another pretender – like President Clinton before him?

Whatever the answer to the last question may be, my fear is that he might be a harbinger of a new breed of politicians that pose as statesmen (or stateswomen, for that matter,

this side of the Channel!): a strange mix of conviction and ingenuity, mendacity and ingenuousness, thespians performing morality plays for an audience that is, increasingly, morally directionless.

S. B.

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