

We multiplied Thatcher by Blair. The result was the decline of government and politics and not just in the UK

So what might be next for us?

Shall some of us become alienated commodities and others greedy buyers and sellers of human commodities?

Or is there a chance that we might participate politically, fairly and fulfillingly in our own governance?

And what about those 'foreigners'? Do they matter?

Note

There are many links in this essay and descriptions of books plus some anecdotes. I have generally tried to treat them as 'asides' indented and set in italics. My success may be variable. At times I write as though holding a conversation. This can mean rhythms meant to be certain become uncertain. But I seem to remember that Thomas Hardy asserted that it was imperfection that made Tess of the d'Urbervilles beautiful. I find that reassuring.

Near the end I have placed the link to the document that may encourage you to critique the essay.

If you bought every book on Thatcher/Blair your shelves would groan under the weight so please do not imagine that my selection is anything remotely exhaustive.

Main Text

The damage to our body politic became much worse with Margaret Thatcher who really did not like discussion especially if it came with dispute and, worst of all, dissent. Senior civil servants who expected to continue to deploy their considerable expertise and experience to advise ministers on policy discovered, when in 1979 she became Prime Minister, that their role now was to be reactive rather than interactive. Sometimes they had previously even been proactive. Very few of Thatcher's ministers permitted their civil servants to challenge them or contribute to policy making on the old consensual basis. Michael Heseltine was an exception in believing that better decisions and

fewer mistakes were made if people with knowledge were allowed to speak their minds.

Anthony King has a lot to say about this in Who Governs Britain? (Pelican, 2015).

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11524640/Who-Governs-Britain-by-Anthony-King-review.html>

He wrote the book before the Jeremy Corbyn phenomenon that, in my view, revitalised politics. As I write in late October/early November 2015 I detect a sense of discomfort among some Labour politicians at no longer being managed and controlled. They have become accustomed to being managed and controlled. They have also become accustomed to believe that government and politics is all about management and control. Have we?

Possibly the most famous book to remind us that politics is about public values was Bernard Crick's In Defence of Politics (Pelican, 1962). It is very short. Crick was a founder member of the Politics Association (as was I). It was an association of teachers of politics and played a prominent part in the production of the Report on Political Literacy (1978). I was involved in the production of that report but make no claims to have significantly contributed. It may, however, be worth noting that one year after the report was published Margaret Thatcher became prime minister and the political education movement lost ground.

https://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Political_education_and_political_litera.html?id=NeolAAAAMAAJ&hl=en

My disagreement with Bernard, who is not around to defend himself, was not about the importance of politics but about the importance of also knowing something about how government operated. I was taught at the University of Liverpool by Fred Ridley who used to say that if we wanted to make democracy work it helped if we knew who to phone up if our dustbins were not emptied. When I was a schoolteacher the significance of that notion became very clear to me. I wanted my kids not to be frightened of the system. Knowledge helps.

Fred linked dustbins to democracy because back then they were the direct responsibility of local government. Now the link is indirect because of privatisation.

If we accept that politics is about the inclusive and consensual arrival at values leading to policies then we can think about the relationship between ministers and civil servants prior to Thatcher as at least partially a political process within government: government *and* politics.

We are, however, also talking about public values. That raises the question of the extent and nature of public participation in the political process. There are many examples from my field of education that demonstrate the poor, even very bad, consequences of simultaneously reducing the role of civil servants to receivers and implementers of driven policy and also perceiving the public to be, and treating them (us) as, subjects of government. Increasingly the public have had things done *to* them and not *with* them. What price democracy? We like to call ourselves a democracy but when public participation is squeezed out of decision making processes we become less and less democratic. I need at some point to explain why I believe that referenda are quite different from *representative* democracy but perhaps not just now.

The essay in the following link is my attempt to make sense of my own belief that the loss of political education from the school curriculum has damaged us.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/Frak8.pdf>

Let me also offer some small examples (anecdotes) of how government operated under New Labour.

At one time I was involved in a project to train learning mentors in schools in England. My contribution was merely to occasionally chair a meeting. Every so often a couple of civil servants would come from London for a chat on progress. At one of these chats we mentioned a big demand from participants for accreditation. 'Yes', said the civil servants, 'we have noticed that too and we are going to set up a working party to look into it'. Thinking I was asking a telling question I asked 'What are the terms of reference of the working party?'

We were told that government intended to commission someone to draw up the terms of reference. It seemed that civil servants could not be trusted to do this themselves. Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) was hired to carry out a survey and many of the people involved in the project from all over the country were invited to London for the presentation of their report.

There we sat in a room in the Department to listen. The first thing we noticed was that none of us (the people with the knowledge) had been spoken to by PWC as they carried out their survey. Retaining, however, an old fashioned belief that the key person at such a meeting was always the civil servant who reported to the relevant minister I targeted the person chairing the meeting for a quiet word. 'Oh', she said, 'I am not a civil servant. I am a consultant on a short term contract.'

The result of all this expensive outsourcing? Nothing!

That is just one example. A phrase I used at the time was 'No consultation but lots of consultants.' Government was quite happy to lose numbers of civil servants because it looked as though they were reducing the wage bill. On another ledger, however, was the cost of hiring short-term consultants. That cost included not only the loss of corporate memory but also a sense of coherence. I once asked a civil servant in the Department for Education and Skills what he did. When he told me I asked him if he was aware that there was another bloke in the same building doing the same job and would he like to have his phone number. He said no he wasn't and yes he would.

The above examples are anecdotes of my own. Academics have been known to belittle anecdotes as less than serious evidence. No one is required to take my word for what I have just written. It does, nevertheless, I believe, chime with what many expert academics have researched and written about government and politics as practised recently.

Perhaps the most spectacular example of this attitude to civil servants and the public in the time of Margaret Thatcher was the Poll Tax. Ultimately it destroyed her ability to control her government and win public approval. It demonstrated what can happen when civil servants begin to lose the opportunity and the confidence to stand up to their ministers: to ministers who seldom have any significant relevant knowledge.

Ivor Crewe and Anthony King feature the Poll Tax very prominently in their book The Blunders of Our Governments (2013) plus lots more about the way that New Labour did government.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/04/blunders-government-king-crewe-review>

There was no political process at all prior to the Poll Tax and no consultation with civil service experts. By the way, the book is a jolly good read, even though it drains away much of the faith you may have that sometimes governments get things right.

When the civil service has had the stuffing knocked out of it, expert knowledge is despised and sharing is discouraged we get the Poll Tax and Iraq and tuition fees and government that is much more inept.

Combine that treatment of civil service knowledge with a democratic disconnection of government from the public and we see the prototype for government and politics as practised today in 2015, not so much in the United Kingdom any more but in England after devolution. England is by far the biggest part of the UK but prime ministers that imagine they speak for Britain ought to remember that these days it is mostly only England over which they exercise any control. Unfortunately, that remaining overall control includes the power to devise and implement foreign policy that far too often makes us

unwillingly, even for too long unknowingly, complicit in crimes against humanity.

And so we come to 1997 and Blair: the untaken opportunity to change the discourse and establish a fair society that enabled the fulfilment of a greater number of its members.

A key word in the New Labour liturgy was 'aspiration'. Another word used a lot by Blair was 'choice'. If, however, the aspirations of A come at the expense of B and if some acquire the power to make choices and others do not we are not experiencing fairness. After all of those years of being in power neither Wilkinson and Pickett nor Stewart Lansley ought to have had to write so much on the ill effects of inequality.

Wilkinson RG and Pickett K, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* London: Allen Lane 2009.

Lansley S, *The Cost of Inequality* London: Gibson Square 2012.

The link that follows is to something I was writing as New Labour was coming the end of its reign. As ever I say a lot about education and if writing it today I might express myself differently in places and employ other examples. I do, however, stick by it and should you be tempted to click on the link there is plenty of electronic capacity to skip sections and pages.

http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/The_Values_of_New_Labour.pdf

I used to stress that Tony Blair was much more about government than he was about politics. It was and still is clear both from his record in Britain and in the approach to his work with various governments around the world that he is very much in favour of the target setting way of doing government. This involves driving hard to hit targets. One of Blair's favourite gurus is Michael Barber whose book *Instruction to Deliver* (Methuen, 2007, revised 2008, 2012) has on its cover an arrow hitting a target. Certainly, like Thatcher, Blair does not take kindly to being contradicted and the word 'delivery' featured very prominently in the speeches and documents of New Labour. But the more I think about the Blair approach to government the more incompetent it seems. The disdain for politics, as with Thatcher, extends to the avoidance of politics within government. Contrast, for example, the internal political processes of the government of Harold Wilson when the decision was taken not to join the USA in Vietnam with that of the government of Tony Blair when the decisions were taken to support the USA in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Wilson was under heavy pressure from the USA to send at least a token force. Left to himself he might well have done so. His cabinet, however, functioned in the traditional manner. It received information. It interacted with

a self-confident civil service. And it allowed discussion. By the way, the traditional way of running government had seen us through two world wars and given us the NHS and much more; not a bad record you might think. It was not, however, 'modern' enough for Blair.

Geraint Hughes's Harold Wilson's Cold War: The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964-1970 (Royal Historical Society, 2009) is a good and heavily detailed book to go to learn about this.

Blair was under little or no pressure from the USA. Any pressure came from his early and entirely unnecessary commitment to support the Bush administration. That pressure was self-chosen and, I believe, self-regarding. His cabinet was provided with carefully selected snippets of information. His own personally appointed chief of staff was directing the civil service.

Here is my response to one of the many books produced by Blair's chief of staff after the fall of New Labour.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/DiaryApparatchik.pdf>

Instead of discussion Blair's cabinet received very carefully composed briefings. Managing government by removing its political element may have created the impression of efficiency because policies actually were 'delivered' but what price the policies? I am sure that Harold Wilson would have liked more control over his government but Tony Blair, like Margaret Thatcher, illustrates the danger of having a lot of control. So I believe my stress should be on the bad consequences that follow when strenuous efforts are made to reduce or remove discussion, dispute and dissent from the decision making process.

Archie Brown's book The Myth of the Strong Leader (Bodley Head, 2014) features Tony Blair with many others. Among the points made about Blair is that he is obsessed with self (my words). This is a good book, an important book and I not only like it but learned so much from reading it.

What then was the reaction to the book by a former member of Thatcher's government and cousin to David Cameron's mother? Ferdinand Mount, a firmly embedded member of today's Conservative Party, wrote a review for Prospect Magazine that was clearly prompted by outrage that Blair had been criticised.

<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/archie-brown-responds-to-ferdinand-mount-review-myth-of-strong-leader>

The judgments made concerning Afghanistan and Iraq are usually framed around the criminality of what took place. I would add incompetence to the charge. It is in my view a mistake to see Blair's ability to lead a government that 'delivered' its policies as a sign of competence. Making bad policy decisions because you run things in such a way that you do not allow yourself

to hear and consider differing views is incompetent. Why do we allow people such as he to get away with it? Blair unwittingly admits incompetence because he tries so hard to classify his belief in weapons of mass destruction that were available to attack us at forty-five minutes notice as a mistake, though it is a mistake he now seeks to share with others. This man whose own book emphasises so very much his own leadership qualities now frames his defence by making much use of personal pronouns in the plural: take the credit but share the blame is, it seems, his motto.

The following link demonstrates how Blair the barrister is constructing his defence.

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/oct/25/tony-blair-sorry-iraq-war-mistakes-admits-conflict-role-in-rise-of-isis?CMP=EMCNEWEML6619I2>

Meanwhile, the floodgates holding back the evidence are opening ever wider, as the following link helps to demonstrate.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/10/blair-iraq-war-apology-151021081506853.html>

If we accept Blair's narrative, we are supposed to tell ourselves that anybody can make a mistake. When, however, mistakes arise from your chosen way of working you must take responsibility. Willingness to be held to account is not one of his attributes. In my view there are so many things for which he should be held to account. Iraq is the most spectacularly evil of his actions and, yes, 'evil' is not a word I would normally use but there may not be a better word to describe the actions of someone whose self-regard made complicit in war crimes the country that he represented.

Left Wing, Right Wing

The terms 'left wing' and 'right wing' are often used very carelessly. They are handy insults that we may think require no explanation. They also conjure up that other carelessly used term, 'centre ground', often accompanied by 'moderate'. Perhaps, now that Jeremy Corbyn has been overwhelmingly elected as leader of the Labour Party, we should remind ourselves how we acquired the terms 'left' and 'right'.

In 1789 as the French Revolution was getting underway the seating arrangements for the National Assembly settled along the following lines. If you believed in absolute government in the form of the king you sat to the right of the chair and if you preferred a more inclusive and democratic form of government you sat on the left. You can imagine all the possible permutations and shuffling around that could go on as different issues came up for discussion: one day you might be on the far left or the far right side and the next day, discussing something else, you might find yourself nearer the middle. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that absolute government is on the right and consensual, inclusive government is on the left. This places

Blair with Thatcher on the far right, just as it would Lenin and Stalin and a few more that are often, mistakenly in my view, classified as on the left.

I make the above points because I believe our recent use of the terms 'left' and 'right' has obscured the differences between absolutism and democracy. We now hear the term 'hard left'. It is often used as an insult to people who would enforce social equality. Inevitably we also hear of 'soft left', which can be seen as an insult to people who do not take their socialism seriously. In considering Thatcher/Blair it is their absolutism that I notice: their avoidance of politics with its discussion of public values and instead the dominance of their will power that prevented experienced and expert people in the civil service from contributing to decision making. I am arguing that it is not simply a case of capitalism being on the right and socialism being on the left: it is also about exclusive decision making being on the right and inclusive decision making being on the left. Certainly democracy can be messy and uncertain while absolute government can appear efficient. In my view the 'efficient' absolutism of Thatcher/Blair was incompetent as well as destructive.

Some more

The following link is to a review of Philip Gould's revised book on New Labour. It has a long foreword by Tony Blair. I chose the title Ersatz Politics because I feel that Gould's use of focus groups was no proper substitute for democracy.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/ErsatzPolitics.pdf>

And here is my review of a great book on what Tony Blair has been doing since he left office. The extent of the secrecy surrounding Blair's activities that had to be penetrated in order to write the book is quite remarkable.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/BlairInc.pdf>

Taking Blair's own book on holiday was not popular with my wife. A friend suggested that I only needed to write the title of my review.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/bookReviewBlair.pdf>

*A theme of much of what I have been writing about over the last few years has been **Social Fraking**. It seemed such an obvious term to describe the policies that have been pursued by British governments since 2010. The real deficit with which we should be dealing is a social and democratic deficit. The links that follow are part of how I developed that theme. I begin by outlining the basis for my views on this. For me social fracking is one of Blair's legacies.*

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/Frak7.pdf>

What follows is a short piece prompted by frustration. If there was one thing that I hoped for in 1997 it was that social values would improve. Here I call for a discourse of humanity. I am no psephologist but my instinct is that the failure to restore a discourse of humanity was a contributing factor in Labour's failure to win the general election of 2010. If you think that instinct springs from sentimentality so be it but here is what I wrote.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/Counterpoint%20to%20the%20current%20Coalition%20Government1.pdf>

The theme of the next link is education policy, mostly in England. It is also a theme of changing approaches to government and politics.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebFor%20DH%20Lawrence.pdf>

In the heading to this essay I refer to commodities. The following link is to an essay on the commodification of education. Possibly it has some use here.

http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/essay_2.pdf

Concluding points

Returning to the points in the headings for this essay I believe that there is no doubt that from 1979 government not only became more absolutist but also that despite a proliferation of policy units and, particularly in the case of Tony Blair and New Labour, an addiction to what has been called *deliverology*, that absolutist approach produced incompetent government. Furthermore, that approach created a democratic disconnection of the people from the government. To people of an absolutist cast of mind democracy is uncertain and untidy. It can prevent government from hitting its targets. It can, on the other hand, force government to think twice about the wisdom of those targets.

As for what might be next for us, and the contrast between commodification and participation, I am not hopeful. I really do worry that social fracking has gone too far, though I hope not. The overwhelming election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party may turn out the same way as the Arab Spring has done in, say, Egypt but for now it is our best hope if we are to learn to love and have a go at that messy thing we call democracy. It might also reduce inequality. For me that is far more important than working to a set of public values that prioritises the protection of bankers' bonuses over maintenance of the welfare state.

As for those 'foreigners', the Tony Blair approach in government was to label and judge rulers and countries according to how well they fitted his personal

template. It happened to be a template that he shared with believers in 'The American Century'. Rulers and countries that did not seek to fit that template could expect little support and lots of pressure. The invasion of Iraq has obscured our awareness of the sanctions under which its people suffered for many years; and all of that suffering was endorsed by Tony Blair.

We in the UK have inherited a narrative that far too readily demonises foreigners. Blair, however, now operates to an adjusted set of values regarding foreigners. Rulers and countries must no longer fit his template: they simply have to give him lots of money: his pockets bulge when he decides that once derided dictators are now dedicated to democracy. He continues to peddle his old notion that government is about setting a target and making other people hit it: I have called it 'government as performance management'; but he accompanies that approach with lots of advice about how to present 'nasty' as 'nice'. If the timings had been different I believe that Blair would happily have acted as a (well) paid consultant to Saddam Hussein.

He is consistent in one thing: his attacks upon Islam and upon Muslims. I have difficulty working out the reasons for this. He appears to be capable only of thinking in terms of labels. I suppose labelling helps him make sense of the world. In my years as an examiner at all educational levels I have seen many examples of students seeking security in the simplistic. Some people like to learn categories and classifications in order to apply them to events and behaviour. The power to categorise and classify is very reassuring. 'That', they will say when they observe someone learning, 'is an example of kinaesthetic leaning' or some such. The label having been applied brings a glow of self-congratulation to the labeller. The next step for a student, and one reason why some get distinctions, is to realise that the walls we erect around categories and classifications when defining them are porous. To achieve that realisation means, however, that you step into a less certain world in which your assumptions may be challenged and you might have to change your mind. Tony Blair does not wish to live in an uncertain world. This, of course, means no distinction for him. The fact that he is a facile writer and speaker is not, I believe, evidence that he can cope with uncertainty. His linguistic dexterity is almost always devoted to defending, not changing, his position. He has made up his mind that inside Islam there is something bad. He has applied his label. Others are forced to tear it off, if they can.

*The link that follows includes a description of how the project **Not In Our Name** came about. Some people will say that Blair is from yesterday and we should forget him. To begin with, his yesterday includes some terrible crimes against humanity and those crimes were the major inspiration for the project. If you have read this essay you will be aware that it is my belief that the damage caused by Blair also includes severe damage to how we now conduct politics and government.*

<http://notinournamecd.co.uk/>

Almost last word

I think it was fair to have begun this essay with a title that brought to mind the consequences of multiplying Thatcher by Blair. In his book *Thatcher and Sons* (2006, Allen Lane) Simon Jenkins saw Blair as a son of Thatcher but it is not simply the case that Blair expunged socialism from his party or that he favoured the 'filthy rich'. He, like she, also believed that government was more important than politics: that it was something you did *to* people rather than *with* them. In the case of Blair the consequence has been death, displacement, desecration, destruction, deformity and a diminution of the meaning of that other 'D' word, democracy.

And he presumed to do it in our name.

Final Link

This link is intended to encourage critique of any or all that I have written above.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.pdf>

Cliff Jones, 6th November 2015