

## "IRAQ: HOW WE WERE ALL MISLED."

**This is the title of a chapter in Gordon Brown's book.**

### "We"? "All"? Really?

**I don't suppose any member of Blair's cabinet of the time has ever made a better constructed defence of how they came to agree to war. As part of his personal case Brown willingly admits that he ought to have barged his way into meetings in order to find out more. The admission is welcome but, I believe, insufficient.**

It is true that evidence was withheld and it is also true that Blair did not run cabinets in the same way as, for example, Harold Wilson when the decision was taken not to join LBJ in Vietnam despite enormous pressure. What is not true is Brown's assertion that Chancellors of the Exchequer did not involve themselves in this kind of decision-making. Anthony Eden was certainly not pleased when as Chancellor Macmillan put the kibosh on his Suez adventure, though he should have done it sooner.

Brown knew Blair better than most. Blair always looked for evidence to fit his preferred case. Whether you are teaching a child who is doing a project or supervising a PhD you are always watching out for the tendency to only assemble evidence that "proves" what you want to be proved. Why did Brown not ask some really serious questions?

Millions of us could see what all but one (and a half, Clare Short) of the cabinet failed to see. Is Brown's real defence that he was too close and involved in government to have any sense of perspective? Had he been a backbencher might he have seen things differently? Possibly. This was a government packed full of clever advisors few of whom had the intellectual strength of the little boy who shouted that the Emperor Has No Clothes.

Our involvement in Iraq was a consequence of how Blair did things big and small. On this occasion at least I wish Brown had put out of his head that supposed pact he had with Blair and really gone for him. It was a resigning matter. Robin Cook resigned. Had Brown done so I really believe it would not have harmed his chances of becoming prime minister.

Harold Wilson resigned on a matter of principle but went on to become leader of the party, prime minister and to win more elections than Blair. Resigning on principle is not a bar to promotion. Failing to resign because of ambition can damage your reputation. I believe that Brown has convinced himself that he behaved honourably on this issue despite admitting to a few errors. Who else has he convinced?

We concentrate upon Blair but in March 2003 during the debate on Iraq his entire career was in the hands of people like Brown. In May 1940 Chamberlain won the vote on the Norway Debate but the percentage of his

own party voting against him or abstaining was almost exactly the same as it was for Blair. For a while Chamberlain felt safe having won. Senior members of his party then made him realise that when such a significant number of your own side signal their dissatisfaction a leader must resign. He did. New Labour contained no one willing to do that. Gordon Brown could have done it. He did not.

I am afraid that Brown's argument in his chapter on Iraq simply will not do. On weapons of mass destruction and the capacity of Saddam Hussein to use them Blair and his government are often judged either to have lied or to have been too stupid to examine evidence properly. There is a 'Third Way' of looking at this. As I mentioned above Blair characteristically looked only for evidence that suited him. This infected the entire New Labour Project. In fact it poisoned government and politics. It still does. Yes, examples of this way of working are plentiful in history but Blairism specialised in it. If Jeremy Corbyn manages nothing more than to squeeze out the poison of Blairism he will have done an enormous service not simply to the Labour Party.

Brown remarks upon the power of Robin Cook's resignation speech. I believe that on the issue of Iraq it was an unbeatable speech. Blair certainly did not have the capacity to respond to it. Had there been any flaws in that speech, Brown could have found and highlighted them. In fact, although impressed with the speech he failed to engage with it. That was, I believe, a fundamental failure committed by someone who once practised proper politics but whose ambition overrode his values.

He tells us a lot about both Afghanistan and Iraq during his time as prime minister. We may applaud his gradual disengagement from Iraq but we are still involved in Afghanistan after how many years? His explanation of how we got into such a mess rests on his belief that Blair always wished to stay close to the USA. Probably that was the case but I believe that it understates Blair's need to be the lead singer in the band. And Brown's introduction of later information about the UK being deceived by the USA about WMDs, although believable in itself, remains irrelevant.

Scott Ritter, the predecessor of Hans Blix, had made it very clear that he did not believe that Saddam Hussein possessed what we claimed that he did. What Ritter had to say was on the bookshelves long before the invasion of Iraq. Brown makes no mention of it. Neither does Blair. And neither of them mentions that the government of Afghanistan twice offered to arrest Bin Laden if they were presented with evidence of his guilt for 9/11. The fact is that the government of the USA was itching to drop bombs and pull triggers and so was Blair. Brown wrote the cheques, lots of them, for the involvement of the UK. Yes, some of that money went to support a range of good causes, as was always the case with Brown, but most of it contributed to death, destruction and displacement.

**There are no prizes for guessing the title of the following chapter. It is,**

## **AFGHANISTAN: A WAR WITHOUT END?**

To paraphrase the historian AJP Taylor,

**“Any fool can start a war but just try ending it.”**

**Blair was such a fool. Brown might have stopped him at the outset but at least he did his best to end the bloody nonsense.**

**Cliff Jones 30<sup>th</sup>. November 2017**