

**FIVE TESTS FOR
GORDON BROWN AND FOR A FEW OTHERS
OR
HOW DID WE GET INTO THIS MESS?**

CONTENTS (yet to be drafted)

PREFACE

This is my attempt to respond to Gordon Brown's book. At a time when our current government seeks to prove that brains are not needed to do the job I believe that it is very useful, and salutary, to read the words of a political grown up, even a flawed political grown up. I shall try to use Brown and his book as a prism to help me make sense of rather a lot. Prisms are, of course, wobbly instruments especially when focussed upon governments that have grown in power at the expense of a diminishing political process. Since 1979 our governments have been consistently shifting rightwards while claiming to have stayed in a mythical middle.

A government that stands on the right has only one card to play in self-justification. It is the card marked COMPETENCE. Successive governments have down played, perverted and, at times, totally disregarded the political process. The consequences have not been pretty. We have now, I believe, reached a point at which too many of us have forgotten the knowledge, the skills and the habits required for political participation. We have allowed ourselves to be manipulated by governments that have clung to and hoarded power. This has not been in our general interests.

BREXIT was a fight for power within the Tory Party. Standing outside the shrinking gated community of that party is to experience the incompetence of yet another self-obsessed government. From what I can gauge from the outside looking in our present government does not, in the phrase used so often by Tony Blair in his book, 'get it'. But then, neither did he who also thought he could do government without politics.

INTRODUCTION

Brown's *Famous Five* were the tests he set to be passed before Britain would join the Euro. He was always good at tests. At school and at

university he passed an awful lot of them at a very early age. In government he liked setting tests. I suggest that this overemphasised government by measurement, though there is more to Brown than simply that. Blair also depended upon government by measurement but the difference is that what Blair wanted measuring changed frequently and as long as he could get a useful sound bite out of a result TB, as friends and colleagues know him, seemed to be happy. They had different approaches to evidence and to detail but perhaps their public values created the clearest contrast; that and their personalities.

My five tests for Brown and for others arise from my reading of his book, *GORDON BROWN, My Life, Our Times* (2017). The tests are derived from a conceptual framework that I devised and have been using since 2010 and the establishment of our Coalition Government. In that year we acquired a government that was openly committed to what I saw as **Social Fracking**. Perhaps the tests will help me make sense of far more than Brown.

Reflecting on that notion it seems to me that 1979 and Margaret Thatcher ('Where there is discord may we bring harmony') saw the real start of Social Fracking. It has long been accepted that Thatcher deliberately destroyed the post-war political consensus that stood on the foundations of the Attlee administrations from 1945 to 1951. By doing so she attacked what she famously declared did not exist: society. We in Britain are all, in one-way or another, the beneficiaries of Attlee and Bevan and Beveridge and, particularly when he was Minister for Housing, Harold Macmillan. The politicians I have mentioned represent three political parties: the consensus.

Let me emphasise again that I do not simply wish to review Brown's book. My intention here is to use the book to help me make critical sense of how the UK in particular has been making such a mess of government and politics. The mess is, I believe, huge.

As the 'Chief Examiner' setting the five tests and assessing and evaluating not just Brown's performance I take responsibility for my definition of terms and shall try to explain myself, especially if my definitions seem to depart from normal usage.

I wish to examine Gordon Brown and others on the following.

- 1. Politics and Democracy.**
 - 2. Intellectualism.**
 - 3. Education.**
 - 4. Society.**
- And**
- 5. What he and others have left us.**

However, before the examination starts, I want to address the issue upon which almost every reviewer of the book seems to have concentrated. This will not be the last time that I refer to the rivalry between Brown and Blair nor endeavour to compare and contrast the

two of them but two moments stand out for me. Possibly they deserve to be called 'defining moments'. I am not talking about the Granita Restaurant 'pact meeting' between the two of them or any subsequent row over the succession.

TWIN PEAKS

I believe that 9/11 gave us **PEAK BLAIR**. It really was his Date with Destiny: Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Man. What action did he choose to take? To whose voices did he listen? Whose voices did he choose not to hear? On what basis did he make his case for intervention? How much medium and long term planning did he undertake? Was truth the first casualty of his decision-making? Has truth ever been allowed to revisit him?

We saw him on television alongside the President of the USA posing as the wise Greek counselling the inexperienced Roman. Soon he would be in front of the cameras again pictured against a backdrop of our 'gallant lads in khaki'. This was a fulfilled Blair. Once again he was the lead singer, not this time of The Ugly Rumours but of the Ugly Alliance of Murderous Liars. He was where he always wanted to be: at the front; of what it did not matter. Neither did it matter who bore the bloody cost. Did such people have a vote? There were no New Labour focus groups for the people of Afghanistan and Iraq.

PEAK BROWN was very different. It was the 2009 G20 meeting in London, eighty years after the Wall Street Crash of 1929. In *Saving the World? Gordon Brown Reconsidered* (2013) by William Keegan the point is made that outside the UK Brown has a very high reputation based upon the actions he took on behalf of the entire world, rich and poor, to prevent 2009 repeating the mistakes of 1929. The point is also made that inside the UK his huge achievement hardly registered.

Brown bemoans what he sees as a personal failure to follow through his action to deal with the crisis by inducing a culture change in banking. His recognition of the need for this change came rather late but losing the General Election in 2010 put an end to any chance of such change especially when in George Osborne we acquired the worst Chancellor of the Exchequer since Churchill in the mid to late nineteen twenties.

Comparing Brown with his predecessor and successors as prime ministers can only enhance his reputation. Comparing him with Osborne as Chancellor is not worth the effort. Osborne was incompetent and Osborne was nasty.

PEAK BLAIR and PEAK BROWN contrast in many ways. The greatest contrast is in their public values. They both intervened in the lives of others. Blair generated continuing death, destruction and displacement. It is his legacy. Everyone knows it. Brown prevented international financial and economic calamity. It is his legacy. No one remembers it.

TEST ONE, POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

The Greeks, particularly the Athenians, gave us these words and because they pondered upon meaning so much we see them as concepts for us to define, re-define and again to re-define. The Athenians did not, however, invent discussion or all variants of group decision-making. We constrain ourselves if we imagine that in order to define Politics and Democracy our only reference point is ancient Athens.

Nevertheless, those Greek words have a gravitational pull and Aristotle, the great conceptualiser, refuses to leave the stage. In *Of The People By The People, A New History of Democracy* (2011) Richard Osborne alerts us to the tendency to conceptualise but by beginning his book with the Greeks he firmly plants in the mind the notion that we are dealing with a Greek/Athenian invention. John Keane in *The Life and Death of DEMOCRACY* (2009) also begins with the Greeks but provides a perspective on the development of democracy that allows us to take into account societies far beyond Greece.

I see **POLITICS** as the inclusive discussion of and consensual arrival at public values. In my opinion defining it as the struggle for or the games that people play to obtain power is to seriously undermine and devalue it's meaning. I find it disappointing that so many politicians and commentators upon the actions of politicians effectively see politics as a dirty game of manipulation. Reading Brown's book I found it necessary to stay alert to signs of what I regard as the misuse of both word and concept. It is the same with any book written by a politician. They tend to believe that politics is defined as what politicians do. Too often what they do is to hurt politics.

DEMOCRACY can be perceived in a number of ways. The Peasants Revolt of 1381, the Putney Debates of 1647, the French Revolution of 1789 are among many examples of people exerting a right to participate in governmental decision making. To sit on the far right in the French Assembly of 1789 indicated your preference for absolute government in the form of a monarch. To sit on the far left indicated your preference for wide participation. I keep this in mind when I hear or read the words Right Wing and Left Wing used as labels for political behaviour. This, of course, places Tony Blair far to the right. And having worked in a local authority run by Militant Tendency it is also where I would place them.

We may find it comforting to tell ourselves that we live in a democracy but when we make our votive offerings to the Goddess Demokratia we seldom notice that after we have left the temple the Goddess Oligarkia has crept in to steal them. This, I believe, is as good a description of the referendum on membership of the EU as many.

Some reviewers of Brown's book judge him to have been a less effective prime minister than his predecessor. Making that judgment indicates to me a current belief that prime ministers must be on the absolutist side of the left/right spectrum. Brown describes his efforts to restore cabinet government

and a proper relationship with the civil service. I see that as neither weak nor foolish, although he had previously done his bit to drastically reduce civil service numbers. In his book he makes use of Macmillan's famous reply when asked what could throw government off course: 'Events, dear boy, events.' He also makes use of Wilson's 'A week is a long time in politics.' This gives the impression of someone surprised by the job: by the lack of control he had compared with his role as Chancellor.

'Overwhelmed' is the word used by some to describe Brown as prime minister, probably because, as he explains in his book, he came to believe that times had changed and prime ministers were now constantly 'in the thick of it'. Quite possibly his early developed sense of responsibility and attention to detail exacerbated the problem in his eyes, though he did try to spread power across his government. He was, of course, constantly under attack from, particularly, the Murdoch press who had previously supported Blair.

But it concerns me that we appear to have formed the notion that only the seeming to be strong (and stable) can be in charge. Theresa May has recently demonstrated the limitations of that belief, certainly as an empty war cry. Yes, Blair had a lot of control but it was based upon carefully crafted narratives (often lies) and the tendency to keep chucking short-term policies at the electorate rather than to think even medium term. His long term amounted to slogans such as 'aspiration' and 'choice' and 'modernisation.'

To put it in a different way, strength and stability can emerge from democracy. They do not have to reside only within autocracy. I would argue that part of Brown's problem as prime minister was that he tried to take some steps towards democracy (and politics) at a time when too many people had come to believe that effective government was autocratic government: government with little politics.

Both politics and democracy require truth. Lies pervert politics and damage democracy. The referendum on EU membership was neither politics nor was it democracy. It was manipulation.

Did Brown do politics? Where might he have sat in the French Assembly? Is Jeremy Corbyn a threat to society because he sits slightly towards the left?

His book provides abundant evidence of early development of a social conscience together with the urge to do something to give effect to it. So much of his early life seemed to be spent writing, campaigning, organising, canvassing and, as ever with the Labour Party, in meetings. I think that was doing politics. Later on I am not so sure.

His 'pact' with Blair, if that is the right word, gave him enormous power over much domestic policy. But for two politicians to effectively say to each other, 'You have that bit and I'll have this bit and after a while I shall stand down and you can have my bit', well, is that even close to my definition of politics? Does it fit any definition of democracy no matter how conceptualised? The Labour

Party had (still has) properly established procedures for selecting its leaders. Yes, there have always been internal stitch-ups, punch-ups, deals and a little light back stabbing but my objection to this pact derives mostly from seeing the damage it did to politics and to democracy. They became about power: obtaining it, keeping it and seizing it.

Later I hope to say something about the contribution of that 'pact' to allowing a relatively unhindered and unchallenged Blair to act on our behalf as a war criminal.

TEST TWO: INTELLECTUALISM

I have made this into an 'ism' because it seems to me almost impossible to discuss government and politics without wading through lots and lots of 'isms'. Once, I seem to remember, there was an attempt to suppress the term 'Blairism' because it was being used disrespectfully. And, of course, since 1979 'Thatcherism' has dominated political discourse. Let me take a moment to explain what I believe Thatcherism to be. There are other ways of explaining it but none of them can make it look good.

I was listening to Patrick Minford, a free market and now Brexit enthusiast, at a small seminar in the University of Liverpool and, just as I would be, was bemused and befuddled by the statistics. Then I realised that it was not about numbers; it was not even about a religious conversion to the beliefs of Austrian economists in Chicago; it was a deeply held conviction that productivity depends upon two things: stimulating already rich people to work harder by offering them the chance of yet more riches while simultaneously stimulating already poor people to work harder by threatening them with yet more poverty.

Theresa May calls all this 'Christianity'.

It is not essential to wear glasses to earn the label 'intellectual' and it is wise to bear in mind that the label is not always applied as a compliment but even as an insult the word suggests a critical thinker.

Tony Blair is very fond of the word and in his book uses it to denote what he wishes us to perceive to be the high brain power of so many of his advisers, particularly Andrew Adonis. Working for Blair were a number of people with high brainpower but were they intellectuals?

We might remind ourselves that under Blair there was huge effort to hit targets: to deliver policy no matter if this week's policy was replacing last week's policy without everybody being told. Doubting the wisdom of the policy was not encouraged. But doubt is the stock-in-trade of an intellectual. Andrew Adonis now doubts the wisdom of a policy he authored and pushed for even although it was against agreed party values. The damage done by the commodification of university learning has at last come home to him. Taking so long to have doubt is hardly what is expected of an intellectual.

Geoff Mulgan was Blair's Director of the Strategy Unit and Head of Policy in Number 10. He had previously worked for Gordon Brown. He wrote a real heavyweight of a book called, *GOOD AND BAD GOVERNMENT* (2006). His book is awash with references that demonstrate his wide reading and scholarship. I think he has caught the virus that has been spreading throughout academe for some years. I call it Mad Citation Disease (MCD). With Michael Barber he once lectured a group of experienced parliamentarians on how government was done these days: New Labour meant New Governance, to borrow a word from the title of Harold Wilson's book of 1976 while demonstrating what I hope is merely Mild Citation Disease.

Underpinning all this is the notion that government is what you do *to* people. They only get involved at the implementation stage. And since the targets (really, Blair's idea of a policy) kept changing the people could only ever be reactive in one form or another. In fact we are looking at government without that untidy thing called politics.

Before I say more about Blair's army of intellectuals it might be useful to reflect on a few earlier politicians and their advisors who might wear that label.

Maynard Keynes ('When the facts change I change my mind. What do you do?') was a member of the Liberal Party who, on those occasions when they were on speaking terms, worked closely with Lloyd George. William Beveridge (a Liberal MP) is famous for his Report but also wrote importantly on unemployment and a fair society. Harold Macmillan (a Conservative) also did a lot of deep thinking on the same subject, especially in the 1930s. Each could frame questions, research, analyse, reflect, assess and evaluate. Each was also willing to be questioned.

Writing a book does not automatically make you an intellectual. Reading a few political memoirs should be enough to establish that. Self-justification often masquerades as self-criticism and critical reflection. Yes, I am thinking of Blair's book. Even writing within a conceptual framework is not enough, especially when authors are unaware of the framework within which they write or fail to critique the values it represents. Brown, for example, knows all about neo-liberalism and yet often uses its language without realising that he is doing so. 'Terrorism' is not a word to be used without raising questions about how careless deployment of an abstract noun can justify war. It is part of the language used by neo-liberals to obtain support for the greater concentration and application of power by governments and by Eisenhower's moneymaking military industrial complex. And surely he should have raised a critical eyebrow when he saw Blair deploying 'reform', that beloved word of old school history lessons, as he *deformed* the English school system.

Twice a Lord, Hailsham (very Tory) wrote a lot, mostly in defence of a stratified society, and tried to present the preservation of an upper class as somehow a middle and reasonable position. In his autobiography he loudly declares his belief in elitism. The fact, however, that as a prefect at school, he

fiercely beat a younger A.J. Ayer the philosopher gave him no rights to call himself an intellectual. The cane transmits pain, not brain.

Attending a public meeting addressed by, for example, Michael Foot or Tony Crosland in the run up to the 1964 general election could be an intellectual treat as you listened to people who did far more than simply sell you an idea as a nice shiny new policy proposal. Such people had done some very deep thinking and were prepared to have that thinking questioned.

But it is not just the depth of research or the width of the reading or even the cleverness of the questions that makes a politician an intellectual. Let me offer a perhaps surprising example, Charles Clarke. Clarke is a defender of Blair and yet when Mary Russell, as Chief Executive of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET), wrote complaining that a speech of his demonstrated a woefully out-dated vision of universities he agreed to a meeting.

On behalf of UCET I wrote the briefing paper. He had the sense to ensure that the last remaining civil servant in the department who knew what this was all about was present. On every point he admitted that he was wrong. And then, my paraphrase, he uttered what might be regarded as the intellectual creed:

“I am learning so much from losing arguments that I need to have more such meetings.”

We arranged to have them. He was then moved, to be replaced by Ruth Kelly who cancelled them all. Not any kind of intellectual was Ruth.

The Field Marshall of Blair's intellectual army was probably Michael Barber known, to his own satisfaction, as Mr. Deliverology. Like me he is a supporter of Liverpool Football Club. He once wrote to the club telling them what they were doing wrong and how they should fix things. They have not won many trophies since. Bill Shankly, remember, equated football with socialism. Winning was important but not as important as the values for which you stood.

Barber was/is known as 'The Control Freak's Control Freak.' I am sure that some people must have an addiction to torture by flow chart and PowerPoint. If so then Barber is for you. Never question the wisdom of the chosen target; just hit it or else. This set the tone for New Labour's New Governance.

Barber is now Chair of the new Office for Students. It looks as though that Office shall be obsessed with data in order to gauge the value for money provided by universities. What they offer is very much perceived to be a commodity. That makes students customers. Education is no longer a public good. It is advertised, bought and sold.

It would have helped if the targets of Blair's administrations had not changed so frequently and it would have helped even more if their philosophical underpinnings had amounted to something more substantial than 'choice' and

'aspiration' and 'modernisation'. Blair loved words such as these. He used them as labels to apply to anything he fancied doing.

As for the late Philip Gould, Blair's Focus Group Master, inventor of so many New Labour slogans, supposed Hegelian who married the Consciousness of the People to Marketing, whose book on New Labour (both editions) was devoured by the Cameroons (as was Blair's book) well, I called my review of his book **Ersatz politics and deviant governance**. It was a dispiriting discursion, though written enthusiastically. Blair wrote a long foreword to the second edition of Gould's book. Perhaps he finally nails down something that can stand as his philosophy. He repeatedly says that New Labour was all about CHOICE. Who got to choose? The powerless have little chance to choose.

Another member of the intellectual army was John Birt. This former Director General of the BBC famously gave us the word 'Birtism' for his approach to management. Restructuring was what you had to cope with if you worked for him as well as constantly having to learn new words to describe old jobs. Blair made him his Blue Skies Thinker without seemingly any awareness that Private Eye had for years made merciless fun of him. I have often wondered if the fact that he went to the boys school almost over the road from Cherie's girls school influenced the appointment.

Jonathon Powell is another. Among his books is *THE NEW MACHIAVELLI: How to Wield Power in the Modern World* (2011). I titled my review **The Diary of an Apparatchik**. It is a good read because of the political gossip it contains. Powell by the way gave Blair the slogan EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION.

Perhaps I should mention Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell but I think that Peter Osborne has said enough about them in his, *THE RISE OF POLITICAL LYING* (2005). They have never sued him I believe. Mandelson's grandfather, Herbert Morrison, harboured an ambition to replace Attlee. He did, however, write a book on British Government that was so well thought of that it was required reading for my degree. I am not sure if that gets him the title of intellectual but his notion of government was rather different from that of New Labour. Yes Morrison was for getting things done but not by commodifying policies for sale and bypassing the civil service.

If agonising when presented with unexpected information is a sign of an intellectual then we might consider Keith Joseph. He once came to a Politics Association Conference. As a founder member of the Executive Committee for this association of teachers of government and politics I thought I had read most of what we had produced. In preparation for speaking to us Joseph had really done his homework. He had read stuff I had forgotten we had written. But he was startled to discover that political education might take place before the age of eleven. I believe he thought primary schools were all about children being prepared for secondary education: preparation for a series of selections up to university I suppose. To participate in political education he seemed to believe that it was necessary to have been gradually inducted into an

approved set of social values. I was sitting next to my old prof who leaned over while Joseph was talking to mutter, 'Not very bright is he?'

Before leaving this topic I want to mention Edmund Burke's speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774. He reminded them and he reminds us that members of parliament are there to deliberate. They are not elected to follow, as though they were instructions, the momentary and changeable views of those that elected them. Faced with Brexit our current MPs, and in particular Theresa May, might do well to read that speech. So might Jeremy Corbyn.

Burke was one of few Conservatives to whom we might apply the word intellectual. Attempts have been made to add Ferdinand Mount to that list. Attempts have also been made to present Michael Gove as a Conservative intellectual. The word 'risible' comes to mind.

It is my view that when in 1997 we thought we had seen the back of Thatcherism with its dumbed down discourse of possessive individualism New Labour further de-intellectualised government and politics. Tony Blair and his courtiers, his intellectual army, must take the blame for this. Gordon Brown's late efforts as PM to add some politics to government were made more difficult because he had not challenged Blair much earlier. Having a row (they had a lot) is not enough. Blair was intellectually empty. Brown was not.

An aside on Brown's chapters on Iraq and Afghanistan

"IRAQ: HOW WE WERE ALL MISLED."

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

My questions are, "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: to war crime. 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, despite enormous pressure, the decision was taken not to join LBJ in Vietnam.

But Brown knew Blair better than most. Blair always looked for evidence to fit his chosen case. Whether you are teaching a child who is doing a project or supervising a PhD you are always on the look out for the tendency to only assemble evidence that "proves" what you want to be proved.

Millions of us could see this. Is Brown's real defence that he was too close and involved in government to have any decent sense of perspective? Had he been a backbencher might he have seen things differently? Possibly. But this was a government packed full of clever advisors few of whom, I am afraid, had the intellectual strength of the little boy who shouted that the Emperor Has No Clothes.

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. And it could have prevented war crime: a continuing war crime.

Harold Wilson resigned on a matter of principle (a doubling of military expenditure that damaged the young NHS so that we could join in the Korean War) but went on to become leader of the party, prime minister and to win more elections than Blair. It is not a bar to ambition.

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.

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 (though incomplete) disengagement from Iraq but we are still very much 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 about WMDs by the USA (the point of his chapter heading), 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. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1956 Harold Macmillan pulled the rug from under Anthony Eden's Suez adventure. Brown could have but didn't do the same for Blair's similar adventures.

There are no prizes for guessing the title of Brown's 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 could have stopped him at the outset but at least he did his best to end some of the bloody nonsense.

TEST THREE: EDUCATION

I struggle to find political office holders that have ever had any kind of grasp on education. That includes David Blunket who is a qualified professional. I have mentioned Charles Clarke and shall make a big exception for Estelle Morris, a fellow member of my teachers union. Her misfortune as Secretary of State was probably that she believed in and did her best to implement agreed Labour Party policy. Blair did not want that. He wanted his policy, whatever it happened to be on a given day.

While writing this I received an email from the Commons Education Committee. They were responding to a petition on tuition fees by circulating a small survey. What is their key question? Do universities provide value for money? For them, you see, education is a commodity. They could have asked about the student experience. They could have classified universities as providers of a common good. But that is not how they see education. Universities now sell it. Students borrow money to buy it. Is it worth the asking price?

In 1970 the Conservatives won the general election and Margaret Thatcher became Secretary of State for Education until 1974. In terms of attainment no one comes close. She created more comprehensive schools than all other secretaries of state combined. She should have been proud of that. She was not. It was a time when professional educators felt able to display some autonomy: to be proactive rather than reactive. In 1971 the Politics Association began to encourage political education, also using the term 'political literacy'. The comprehensive school movement generated widespread research, often sponsored by the now defunct National Council for the Study of the Comprehensive School. And there was lots more creativity and interest in what it was like to be a professional educator. Among

many others Denis Lawton and Lawrence Stenhouse in particular were writing books and involved in activities that inspired what felt like professional fulfilment. From 1970 to 1974 we were, remember, still maintaining the post-war political consensus.

Thatcher was, in 1970, inexperienced in government. Her four years in charge of education implementing the policies of Labour's Tony Crosland taught her to be wary of confident and knowledgeable civil servants. When she became prime minister she ensured that they were subservient to ministers. The professional educational autonomy of the sixties and seventies began to disappear by the late eighties.

A last professional hurrah

Being in at the start of the General Certificate for Secondary Education (GCSE) was enormously professionally fulfilling. It was probably the last hurrah from the profession. Previously there had been an emphasis, particularly for those children in grammar schools, on the recall of knowledge, requiring 'correct' answers. Examinations were designed to produce an easily understandable rank order. Now we tried to differentiate by outcome, asking more open questions that might generate unexpected but valid responses. Also there was lots of coursework that encouraged research and sustained learning. The examination was introduced in 1988 but the build up to it had taken a few years. For me it matched the move to comprehensive schools and signified both professional confidence and the humane treatment of young people. Now fewer eleven year olds were subjected to racial selection because the use of the eugenic 11-Plus examination was confined to a few backward looking local authorities. The expected social consequences looked good. Today I note that Theresa May would like to revive the eugenics movement and use secondary education to reinforce social stratification.

In 1991 John Major selected reverse gear. As a consequence of a speech that he made the gradual reduction of coursework began and the nonsense of tiered papers was introduced. From being integral to learning the GCSE examination fell to being a mere measurement of learning. Having been involved in learning and teaching in every phase I have always been on the lookout for unexpected evidence for unintended but valid learning outcomes. The so-called bottom of the class kid can often surprise you while the so-called top of the class kid is constrained to follow what it imagines to be the rules.

Policy-makers thirst for data. They need it in order to demonstrate that they are better than their predecessors, particularly if they belonged to a different political party. A description of learning that might include some conditionals and contextualising and some acknowledgement of unexpected evidence for unintended but valid learning outcomes is not what they want. Remember that for Blair hitting today's target was what mattered.

I offer this very short piece as an antidote to the effects of such an approach to policy.

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

Kenneth Clarke did untold damage to the National Curriculum when he ignored the research being carried out on assessment. He simply imposed his own un-researched norms for seven year olds telling everybody what levels he expected children to reach. His successor John Patten added an extra higher level in order to claim that he had produced an improved national score. Clarke also created an army of inspectors to apply sanctions to schools and teachers that failed to play the game of education according to his rules. There is more on Clarke below.

I have already written what seems to be a lot on the ineptitude of government education policy makers so I propose to provide links with what I hope are helpful comments on my previous writing. There is some repetition and the term 'self-plagiarism' comes to mind.

What follows is a short account of a time when I first began to realise that politicians responsible for education had no idea of the existence of normative curves or assessment criteria. I mention Kenneth Clarke who, like Brown, became Chancellor of the Exchequer. Neither of them seems to have had a clue about the meaning of the word 'average' or, even worse, how an average can be constructed from misleading figures.

The link includes another to a very much longer account of the impact upon education of Clarke and Balls. One reason for including it is that Ed Balls was very close to Gordon Brown. In his book Brown writes enthusiastically about visiting academies with Ed Balls when he was Secretary of State for Education without any sense that they were part of the privatisation and commodification of schools, a policy now clearly seen to have been disastrous. Many people predicted the disaster. He also conveys no understanding of league tables. This man so fond of footy seems to believe that a school can climb a ladder without any other school having to slide down a snake. The teams he supports only go up the league if other teams come down.

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

I was asked to contribute a chapter to a book, *Mental Health and Well-Being in the Learning and Teaching Environment* (2016). My chapter concentrated on how the makers of policy created stress. The stress makers do not, of course, confine themselves to education. By holding the people accountable to government these policyfiers remind us that we are subjects not citizens. Get hold of enough money and you can win the right to be a ruler. All you have to do is set up your stall in the market for false politics and engage in a little bribery: exchange a peerage for a million or three and a little bit of favourable legislation and it gives you power. And, yes, I do think cynicism is appropriate.

Here is the link to a version of the chapter. There is yet more on this in the first item of **FURTHER READING** much further below. (Please note that it is not included in this edition).

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

Generally speaking I believe that, particularly in England, education has experienced a combination of instrumentalism and commodification. When GCSE was introduced it came with a video. There was a song.

It's a testing time, it's a testing time, it's a....testing time.

Little did we know as we cheerily sang away to each other that what was meant as humour would become the stick with which all participants in education at any age would be beaten by politicians.

TEST FOUR: SOCIETY

Prime minister Margaret Thatcher, talking to Women's Own magazine, October 31st 1987:

"I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation."

A good place to start the **Society Test** do you think? For Thatcher society did not exist. Society requires regulations and laws. It seems easier to govern if you do not bother with too many of them: if you release the individual to be individualistic. That way true believers think there will be less for government to do. If things go wrong the blame does not reach the government. It provided you with opportunity. If you cocked up its your fault.

In *THE PRIVATE ABUSE of the PUBLIC INTEREST Market Myths and Policy Muddles* (2008) Brown and Jacobs point out the contrary silliness of this. Privatising while continuing to maintain parallel publicly accountable services adds a layer of regulations and also regulators who have to be paid and trained. This increases cost and confusion and, I suggest, makes government both busy and incompetent. Society tends

to become dysfunctional if you do not know where to telephone when your dustbins are not emptied.

Tony Blair ought to have replied 'SOCIETY, SOCIETY, SOCIETY' when he was asked in 1997 to give us his priority. As a Son of Thatcher he could not have said that. The often frenetic activity of his administrations that held the people accountable to government by constantly setting targets to be hit (or else) may appear to be at odds with Thatcherite de-regulatory urges. It was, I believe, simply a more driven stripping out of those political and democratic processes, procedures and societal norms that once attempted to ensure that governments were accountable to the people. As I have pointed out, Blair did government without politics. Doing that damages society. Thatcher's preference was to pretend that it was not there while simultaneously making it respond to instruction and inspection. We may see her as a privatiser but she did, in fact, nationalise the school curriculum and made children, schools and teachers accountable to government.

Both Thatcher and Blair liked government because it offered control. Neither liked politics because it risked the loss of control: the losing of arguments. And Gordon Brown played a far bigger part in de-regulation than, in my view, he would like to admit. What he did with banks and the city encouraged irresponsibility. He did not cause the global crisis but as I have hinted in **TWIN PEAKS** above it took that crisis for him to realise how anti-social was the behaviour of our financial sector. Because it stands for the inclusive discussion of and consensual arrival at public values politics sensitises government: it counters the addiction to power.

Equality (with inequality) is an issue that has a huge impact upon society. As I write the introduction of votes for women is being discussed and celebrated. The year was 1918. Equal voting rights did not actually arrive until 1949. The men with whom women were gradually becoming more equal in terms of the right to vote were themselves not equal until then. We may treat votes for women as a single issue to be studied in school, for example, but broaden the context and we can see more complex relationships between issues. Who now sees the 1970 Equal Pay Act as a single socially transformative action? The factors maintaining inequality are only partially susceptible to treatment by Acts of Parliament. We are back to values again: to public values. To discover why there continue to be gaps in pay between men and women we must search among those values, some of which are often hidden from view.

Perhaps the very concept of equality is troublesome for some. Had Bill Gates paid himself the same wage as his employees he would not now be in a position to travel the world deciding which humanitarian projects he will support. Should he be praised for his generosity? Do our public values allow the greedy exploiters of both workers and customers to be lauded for their charitable works? In the UK he would now be Lord Gates, especially if he had slipped a few bob to the Tory Party.

(Sir) Richard Branson and Bill Gates and, I am afraid, many others obtain a fame that has its foundations upon inequality. Who benefits? Not even, it seems, those at the top of the pile benefit from living in an unequal society.

The following link is to a review of a book written during the last New Labour administration. My question is why, given that so-called New Labour had been in power since 1997, it had to be written. The central point of the authors is that equality is good for all. Inequality does not simply bring harm to the unequal. It harms society: all of it.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/13/the-spirit-level>

And this book was published one year after New Labour lost power. I ask the same question. The responses of our current government to the result of the EU referendum suggest that inequality will be a growing feature of our society. And that inequality will be measured not merely by money but also by health and happiness. Capitalism is not good for us.

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/book-review-the-cost-of-inequality-why-economic-equality-is-essential-for-recovery/>

Supporters of New Labour will point to initiatives such as Sure Start as evidence of a commitment to socialist values. Comparison with what happened when the Coalition took over in 2010 helps to make that point. For me, however, there was no deep inhalation of Capstan Full Strength Socialism. What we got from New Labour was Silk Cut Extra Mild Socialism with a very long filter. Blair made it clear to Brown that he would not accept higher taxes on the rich, not even at the level that Thatcher considered acceptable. What was it that Peter Mandelson said?

We are intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich as long as they pay their taxes.

And those taxes were low.

TEST FIVE: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

In *THE TORTOISE AND THE HARES* (2008) by Giles Radice there is a description of the different approaches of Attlee and Churchill to chairing cabinet meetings during the war. If you have a hardback copy it is on page 115.

When Attlee presided over the cabinet, everything changed. A member of the coalition government was asked about the contrast: 'When Attlee takes the chair, Cabinet meetings are business-like and efficient, we keep to the agenda, make decisions and get away in reasonable time. When Mr. Churchill presides, nothing is decided; we listen enthralled and go home,

many hours later, feeling that we have been present at an historic occasion.'

And my point is? Even inside the officially most powerful governmental group political participation is important. Charisma sells but it does not get the government's ironing done. In 1945 the government led by Attlee demonstrated the dependent connection between democratic politics (discussion) and governmental competence (getting the job done). We are told by Blair's intellectual army (especially Barber and Mulgin and Powell, not forgetting Adonis) that times have changed. In his book Gordon Brown agrees. The connection is now between charisma and flow chart. Charisma tells us what target to hit. The flow chart tells us how to hit it. So who gets to ask if it was a wisely chosen target? How many bums got to sit on Blair's sofa?

It is my belief that despite the untidy uncertainty of wide political participation doing government without it and cranking up autocracy leads to Afghanistan, to Iraq, to commodified education, to knowing the price of health while ignoring its value, to, ultimately, a fracked society.

1997 could have changed all this. Blair's chosen political illiteracy was the reason that we did not. How long might he have lasted in an Attlee government? Silly question: he would never have got into it.

I called my review of Blair's book **From illusion to delusion** and ended with the following words.

I think that he certainly did have a towering ability to assert himself at certain times and in certain situations. The book, however, reads like an apologia from the hero of a Greek play who has yet to realise that he was taking part in a tragedy to which his own personality had contributed so much. He retains the ability to do all the same old conjuring tricks but he should no longer expect us to believe the illusion. His delusion is that he still does.

For me Brown's tragedy is the greater. We know from *THE RISE OF NEW LABOUR* (2001) by Heath, Jowell and Curtice that having Blair as leader was not at all crucial to the result of the 1997 general election. Had Brown replaced John Smith as leader Labour would have won just as comfortably. That would also have been the case had Smith not died. We also know that Project New Labour was not simply Blair and his mates. Gordon Brown signed up to it. My feeling is that Neil Kinnock's failure to defeat John Major reinforced the natural Thatcherites in the Labour Party. They seemed to believe that the political weather had permanently changed and that they must be driven by that wind. Some were only too happy being blown to the right. Brown was not a natural Thatcherite but like so many the urge to obtain power overrode the values that initially drew him into the Labour Party. Tony Blair had no such values. His tragedy is about loss of power. Brown's tragedy is about the erosion of his socialism. Too late, I believe, this began to dawn upon him.

I have one caveat: had Brown become prime minister in 1997 who would have become Chancellor of the Exchequer? The initials OMG could have been invented for the thought of Blair in that role.

Today we have a government that does not do politics, is incapable of doing the governmental ironing and focussed only upon the retention of power. At one time we could have said that the philosophy of the Conservative Party was a rationalisation of greed and privilege. I am sure that if given the space to relax and expound the party would, once again, attempt to convince the peasantry to vote for the Sheriff of Nottingham.

“I am not a quitter” says Theresa May. Translated this means that she cannot bear to lose power. For now that is all that counts.

Anthony King is not the only close observer of British governments to have noted their tendency to hoard power. Central governments of every persuasion have always been able to find reasons to take power from local government. Independent thought and action represent a threat to ministers wishing to see their policies implemented. As Secretary of State for the Environment (in effect local government) in 1976 Peter Shore, I remember, would rail against local councils when they failed to fall into line. The usual method of disciplining them was to simply withhold funds: more to be spent at the centre.

Particularly in England the teaching profession that had for a while practised some autonomy with lots of co-operation between Local Education Authorities found itself sidestepped and powerless after the passing of the 1988 Education Act setting up the National Curriculum. We need to remember that this was an enabling act that placed enormous power into the hands of a secretary of state.

In 2010 Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education imposed policy without proper scrutiny by using parliamentary procedures usually reserved for emergency legislation concerning, for example, terrorist threats. The setting up of academies disconnected schools from democratically elected local government. That, of course, was Gove’s intention. It was his terrorist threat: part of his contribution to the fracking of society.

What today, particularly in England, provides a form of cohesion for the school system is not a shared commitment to a local and possibly diverse community. It is inspection. These inspectors do not work to the professional values promoted by Lawrence Stenhouse in 1975. They have become the traffic wardens of education and other aspects of public life. They serve government rather than provide a public service. As society is being fracked I question the purpose of inspection. I believe that as governments frack society the effect of inspectors examining our increasingly privatised public services is to make that fracking worse. We no longer co-operate to serve; we compete for contracts and the profits we hope they bring. Inspectors enforce a race to hit the target no matter how unwisely chosen that target might be.

Government validates social fracking because it has the desire and the power to do so.

Our local Carnegie Library now wears a TO LET sign. In the time of David Cameron's Big Society the idea was that in the name of Localism volunteers would replace professionals to provide such a service. For years now that library has stood empty: a symbol of the deliberately chosen policy of austerity. The only question local councils must ask themselves at budget time is which service shall they cut?

I recently spent time in a hospital whose incomplete replacement building could be seen out of the window. No one was working to finish it. The private company holding the contract had finally crashed after being given a series of contracts by government hoping to stave off the evil day. When the money for Contract A ran out it was financed by the money for Contract B. That meant an urgent need for Contract C to fund B. And so it went on until the crash. The idea was to keep bidding for a range of government contracts in order to keep going. This is not, as we used to say, the way to run a navy. Government could have both financed and managed the building of that new hospital but, like its predecessors, it does not believe in that sort of thing anymore.

Margaret Thatcher destroyed so much of our manufacturing industry and replaced it with a manufacturing industry.

If I look back over the five tests I remain convinced of the usefulness of my conceptual framework. The very notion of social fracking seems to me to be a good description of what has been happening, certainly since 1979. Might I have found a different set of five tests or, effectively, component parts of the social fracking kit? I did say that I was writing to stimulate critical conversation so perhaps I can leave it to others to think of something better.

If, however, I have made a reasonable stab at uncovering some of the reasons for the state we're in perhaps I can attempt to formulate some ideas that might make things better.

In the meantime here is a good old-fashioned examination question.

Politics is left wing while government is right wing. Discuss.

Cliff Jones 23rd. February 2018 (incomplete)

