

FIVE TESTS FOR GORDON BROWN INTRODUCTION

NOTE: this is a first draft of the early part of my response to Gordon Brown's book. At a time when our government seeks to prove that brains are not needed to do the job I believe that it is very useful, even salutary, to read the words of a grown up. I shall have much criticism of him later on. This is the story so far.

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 university he passed an awful lot of them at a very early age. In government he liked setting tests. I suggest that this overemphasised a belief in 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.

I have set five tests for Brown arising from my reading of his book, *GORDON BROWN, My Life, Our Times* (2017). I do not simply wish to review his 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.

As the Chief Examiner setting the five tests and assessing and evaluating Brown's performance I take responsibility for the definition of terms and shall try to explain myself, especially if my definitions depart from normal usage.

I wish to examine Gordon Brown on the following.

- 1. Politics and Democracy.**
- 2. Intellectualism.**
- 3. Education.**
- 4. Society.**
- 5. Has he, with others, got away with it?**

TWIN PEAKS

However, before the examination starts, I want to address the issue upon which almost every reviewer 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 or any subsequent row over the succession.

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? Whose voices did he listen to? 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 a very 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.

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. Losing the General Election in 2010 put an end to any chance of that 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 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 re-define again. The Athenians did not, however, invent discussion or 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 words have a gravitational pull and Aristotle, for one, 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) 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.

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.

Some reviewers of Brown's book judged 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 absolutist. Brown describes his efforts to restore cabinet government and a proper relationship with the civil service. I see that as neither weak nor foolish. In his book he does make 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.'

'Overwhelmed' is the word used by some to describe Brown as prime minister, having read in the book that 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, though he did try to spread power across his government.

But it concerns me that we seem to have formed the notion that only the strong (and the 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 ability 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.'

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 was that he tried to take some steps towards democracy at a time when too many people had come to believe that effective government was autocratic government.

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?

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 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. It became about power: obtaining it, keeping it and seizing it.

Later I hope to say something about the contribution of that 'pact' to allowing an unhindered and unchallenged Blair to act 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 to be Thatcherism.

I was listening to Patrick Minford, a free market 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 a New Way to do Government. 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) keep changing the people can only ever be reactive in one form or another. In fact we are looking at government without that untidy thing called politics.

As I proceed with this draft I hope to say more about Blair's 'intellectuals'. They include the King of the Flow Chart and PowerPoint, Michael Barber, the

Hegelian Focus Group Meister, Phillip Gould, the inventor of Birtism, John Birt and the New Machiavellian, Jonathon Powell.

I find it difficult to use the word 'intellectual' about any Tory though I might say something about Ferdinand Mount. Trying to find words to describe Thatcher as a student a university contemporary of hers was reduced to saying that she had a good memory.

More deathless prose later, Cliff Jones November 23rd. 2017