

A BRIEF RESPONSE TO CAMERON'S BOOK

David Cameron's book *FOR THE RECORD* has an air of desperation about it, particularly toward the end when he attempts to both justify the referendum and the work of the governments led by him. He claims to have rescued a broken country, transformed the English school system, narrowed the gap between rich and poor and fought a referendum that was entirely inevitable. He argues mostly by means of assertion.

Educational standards were, he says, going down. Michael Gove, that great intellectual (Cameron's label for him), raised them. The whole and entire point about standards is that they never go up, nor do they go down. They are supposed to stay in one place so that reliable measurements and descriptions of performance can be made. The problem is that defining standards requires good research. Our politicians do not like research. Gove in particular disdains it. For example, when the assessment of performance in Key Stage One was being planned the required research was carried out by the University of Leeds. I was one of many research associates involved. We worked with seven year olds in schools across the country. There were ten levels available, all with descriptors (criteria) helping us to make a decision on the performance of young people. The T in SAT stood, in those days, for TASK not TEST. It was Thatcher who wanted it changed. We used a range of experimental SATs.

I remember scratching my head about the performance level of one girl. Her spoken English was off the scale. When the real thing started what level might she and others like her be awarded? Kenneth Clarke ignored all the research and told us that Key Stage One could only use the bottom three levels. We would, he said, find the average in the middle. And, of course, that might be where you would expect to find it. Twenty eight percent of young people achieved Level One in English. Clarke and the Daily Mail screamed that it was disgraceful that one third of children were below average and illiterate. Twenty eight percent is not one third and one third is not an average. Furthermore, the descriptor for Level One said, 'Can read with some assistance'. That applies to lots of politicians. Clarke introduced Ofsted to ensure that teachers followed policy. Young people like the girl I mentioned were limited to a Level Three. If 'standards' were low who made them so? Clarke did by imposing a ceiling. The only research done was in his head. But, however, the next year John Patten took over as Secretary of State. He allowed children who had been banging their heads on the Level Three ceiling to have Level Four. Patten then announced that after one year of the wonderful Conservative policy 'standards' had gone up.

Cameron has no idea about any of this and simply writes according to preconceived Conservative assumptions about teachers in state schools and colleges. And how on Earth he believes that anything done by Gove as Secretary of State for Education was positive I do not know. The number of schoolteachers supporting the Tories fell drastically during the time of Gove. It may be a normal human trait to believe what you wish to believe but it is very true of Cameron.

His chapter on Libya echoes Blair. One day, Cameron believes, all the dead and displaced people will thank him for what he did. He tells us how reluctant was Obama to get involved and goes into detail about all that he did to remove Gaddafi. Sarkozy may have been by his side but this was HIS War. I could not help concluding that he felt that like Blair every prime minister was entitled to a war. What went wrong was, by the way, not his fault. Of course not! He writes as though Gaddafi was the Baddy and he, Cameron, was the heroic Goody.

NOT MY FAULT is a theme of the book. He has a clever way of promoting that theme. He takes the blame for lots of things such as failing to perceive until too late how bad others were, particularly Gove and Boris. As you might expect, the EU referendum looms large but he leaves it till near the end of the book. He is aware of the criticism that the referendum was only about control of the Tory Party so he deals with it by simply saying that it was not. EU membership scarcely registered as an issue in polls until he drew attention to it. He knows that the referendum was merely advisory but justifies treating it as binding by telling us that he had to. The 2011 referendum on our voting system was very unusual in being binding. He has a degree with the word POLITICS in it so he knows the difference. 37% of the electorate voted to leave the EU with the result that we have become less and less democratic. Theresa May wanted to use the Royal Prerogative and Boris thrills to the sound of those words.

Cameron appears to know a lot about economics (the E-Word is also in the title of his degree). He can tell us all about the Exchange Rate Mechanism and he admires fellow Bullingdon Club member Osborne. In early 2010 our economy was recovering from a global and mostly Wall Street created crisis. In late 2010 Osborne selected reverse gear. Austerity! The poor paid, not the pornographically rich. For Cameron reverse gear was top gear.

MODERNISATION is a favourite word. It was also used a lot by Blair. In Cameron's case it is the Tory Party he is talking about. He modernised it and made it liberal minded. Well, he has convinced himself that he did. In my view the deliberately chosen but un-needed austerity programme had nothing liberal about it; but then, for me, the L-Word prompts thoughts of Gladstone, Lloyd George, Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge. Same sex marriage I shall allow as evidence of a liberal approach but the increase in the numbers of the homeless or those committing suicide because of the approach to benefits; or the deliberately ratcheted up hatred of immigrants? He does not seem to have noticed any of that.

REFORM is also used as Blair did. At school history lessons we learned that ending slavery, expanding the franchise, the factory acts and free education for all typified reform. Cameron thinks that what he did and, particularly, Gove should be classified as belonging in the same category. He says the same of the NHS. Writing of his so-called attempt to reform the EU it is clear that his main purpose was to provide the UK with more freedom to be capitalist. He writes scathingly of Corbyn for not taking the stage with him during the referendum campaign. Philosophy is another word in the title of his degree but he seems to be unaware of the philosophical chasm between him and the leader of the Labour Party. He seriously believes that Corbyn ought to have adopted his narrative.

The book is over 700 pages. There is a lot of stuff in it. He makes clear that he is a dedicated Conservative. He wants to be a nice Tory Boy. He has heard of towns such as Sunderland and Liverpool and he is aware that people might regard him as belonging to a particular social class. He would like to connect with others not of his class but cannot quite manage it. He appeals for our sympathy. He did not get mine. Like Blair with Iraq he would like us to believe that his only major failure was the referendum. From 2010 he inflicted much nastiness upon society, with some startling exceptions.

This is not a review but a response and I am aware that reading the book has stirred within me what we might regard as personal prejudices. To make a judgment I recall hearing Keith Joseph giving a talk. My old professor of Government and Politics, Fred Ridley, was sitting next to me. He leant over and loudly whispered, "Not very bright is he?"

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