

THE COMMODIFICATION OF POLICY AND PERSONALITY

AKA

BLAIRISM AND THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF POLITICS

Before Blair the Labour Party felt connected to a relatively cohesive social group upon whose votes it could usually count. Its support was not confined to that group but in terms of public values there was a discernable harmony that generated reliable votesⁱ.

Societies change in all sorts of ways and many sociologists and political scientists devote their professional lives to making sense of change, finding new labels for old and identifying trends. People write books about movements that often, for a time, appear to define periods. A lad I taught told me that when I began teaching in his boys' secondary modern in Bootle in 1968, wearing a knotted scarf and hair touching my ears (also a proper suit I must add) they told each other that the sixties had arrived. Mind you, the head had been there since 1937.

A problem with change is that it stimulates an urge for it to be captured. In his bookⁱⁱ Tony Blair makes great use of the word 'aspiration' as though he had identified and defined a new movement to which he could attach himself and so ride to electoral victory. This sort of thing can become very silly, most recently when politicians have talked about us being ready for the twenty first century. When the clock struck midnight on the 31st. December 1999 did we all become different people? And different cultures count their years in other ways so why the fuss?

What I believe we saw with Blair and New Labour was a party switching from a reasonably coherent and steady set of values that it had used throughout its life to the deployment as commodities of policies and personalities designed to appeal to and match what it perceived to be changing social trends.

Blair's focus group meister was the late Philip Gouldⁱⁱⁱ. He would be out there discovering what supposedly representative groups of voters had on their minds, distilling what he had learned and presenting it to Blair. This was meant to ensure that policies would resonate with voters. It also helped with the construction of narrative although, as we have learned from Peter Osborne^{iv}, the narratives of New Labour often had no more than a tenuous link to truth.

Gould's work reinforced Blair's approach to government by means of target setting and performance management. In this Blair was heavily influenced by Michael Barber, Mr. Deliverology^v.

Gould also declared himself to be a Hegelian. There are many references to Hegel and the dialectic in Gould's book (both editions). In order to understand Blair it helps to consider Hegelian notions of 'spirit', 'force of mind' and 'consciousness'. The impenetrability of Hegel's metaphysics challenges us but people such as John Plamenatz^{vi} can help.

I believe that Blair has a sense of (not knowledge of) history and sees himself as having within him the spirit of the age and also of having an awareness not exactly of the consciousness of the people but of what that consciousness would be if only the people would listen to him. As for Blair's force of mind that can be seen most clearly in the effort he expended working against declared party policies to introduce tuition fees, for example. In his mind lies are not lies if they support a narrative that persuades us to take a course of action that his instinct tells him is the right one.

He sold us policies and he sold us himself. A criticism of Jeremy Corbyn that Blair does nothing to counter is that he lacks the charisma of a true leader. So much have we learned to believe in strong leadership^{vii} that we forget that its consequences in Blair's case include the death and displacement of millions of innocent people. Today it puzzles him that we do not rush to buy the commodities that he brings to market.

As I write, Theresa May is announcing to the world that when it comes to negotiating Brexit she will be a 'bloody difficult woman'. Irrespective of her introduction of gender identity (shades of Thatcher) is this how prime ministers see themselves today? If so then I believe that Blair contributed more than most to this vision of the powerful.

And on the subject of charisma I remember a piece in Giles Radice's book about Attlee, *The Tortoise and the Hares* (2008). He is comparing Attlee and Churchill when chairing cabinet meetings. He quotes a cabinet member.

'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.'

Blair's cabinet meetings were not long but the reason for that was that too little information was provided to hold any kind of useful discussion. The word 'charisma' does not leap to the mind when thinking about Harold Wilson but not only did he win more general elections than Tony Blair but his cabinet felt that it had enough information and enough confidence in itself to reject the suggestion that it join the USA in Vietnam^{viii}.

In Theresa May we have a politician whose first thought after Brexit was to reach for the Royal Prerogative. Our passports now say that we are citizens but, no matter how many changes to the law we have seen, we remain subjects. When people rail against the Royal Family a point is being missed because monarchical powers are actually in the hands of Parliament and,

much of the time, Parliament is in the hands of a prime minister who can count upon a majority in the House of Commons.

We shall not become a republic as long as remaining a monarchy serves those that benefit from our present power structure.

It does not help that we forget the original meanings of the terms 'left' and 'right'. In 1789 France taught us that the further left you sat in the Assembly the more keen you were for people to participate in government: the further right you sat the more you believed in absolute government. This is why I believe that we must place Tony Blair on the right. Old school textbooks on government and politics included chapters on Accountability, by which was meant the accountability of government to the people. Blair turned this on its head and, by means of target setting, performance management and inspection, his governments held the people accountable to government. We were persuaded to vote for this because he was so good at commodifying policy and personality.

Our choices in this crowded few weeks of elections up to the 8th June 2017 are between a probably untidy democracy and an absolute government that, because of its obsession with power, privilege and greed, will politically and socially frack the country.

Theresa May is an amateur follower of Blair because, unlike him, she has no mates. He had an entire New Labour machine. At times the machine was overwhelmed because it tried to sell too many policies at the same time, withdrawing some from sale without warning only to replace them with more White Papers and Acts of Parliament than you could shake a stick at. But he and his machine retained power for a long time. In that it was effective. Presiding over New Labour was the greatest commodity of all: the Charismatic Tony Blair himself.

Theresa May has no machine and she has no charisma. Her policies are scarcely designed to appeal to the majority of voters. When calling the General Election she made it very clear that her priority was power. That part of Blairism she understands.

The legacy of Blair includes not only widespread death, displacement and deformity but also an impoverished politics. Policies and personalities are commodities for sale in pursuit of power. And as society changes so voters too become commodities that can be bought and sold.... Down the river.

Cliff Jones 4th. May 2017

Postscript

To critique what I have written the following may be useful.

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

End notes follow

i

The Rise Of NEW LABOUR, Party Politics and Voter Choices (2001) by Heath, Jowell and Curtice provides carefully compiled and analysed data on a number of the factors that brought about New Labour and its early consequences. I wish they had problematised the concept of ‘modernisation’, a favourite New Labour word.

Modernizing Minds in El Salvador, Education Reform and the Cold War (2012) by Lindo-Fuentes and Ching describes how, in the name of modernisation, supported by lots of money and designed by very clever people, the military regime of the country managed to create an educational policy that helped to start a civil war. Failing to include schoolteachers at the policy making stage was a contributory, some think key, factor.

ii

I called my review of Blair’s book *From illusion to delusion*. It was suggested to me that there was no need to write more than the title. Here, so that you may judge for yourself, is a link to the review.

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

iii

Here is my review of Gould’s book. More than ever I think that Ersatz Politics was an appropriate title.

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

iv

Here is a review of Osborne’s book on political lying written by a former New Labour spin-doctor.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3640937/Lies-damned-lies-and-politics.html>

v

Partly self-deprecatingly and partly proudly Michael Barber has adopted the word ‘deliverology’ to describe his central belief of how to do government by setting clear targets and hitting them as a sign of success. In 2005 he left his UK government job to become a partner and head of McKinsey’s Global Education Practice. While there he co-authored, in 2007, *How the world’s best-performing school systems come out top*. The word ‘instructor’ replaces ‘teacher’ in this short work. Recently he has been Chief Education Advisor at Pearson, a profit making company with a huge global educational reach. He has been described as ‘the control freak’s control freak’.

First published in 2007 Michael Barber's *Instruction to Deliver* was revised in 2008. It is endorsed by academics who are fascinated by how government works and keen to know how it can be made to work efficiently. It is almost a textbook for politicians and administrators around the world who want to learn how to implement policy. If you like that sort of thing.

vi

In *Man and Society, Volume III* (1963, 1992) John Plamenatz tells us that in order to understand Hegel we must get to grips with his metaphysics. He then warns us how difficult an undertaking this is. Fortunately, Plamenatz is able to show us that among the confusing, the inexplicable and the wrong there is gold in there somewhere.

vii

Archie Brown wrote a great book called *THE MYTH OF THE STRONG LEADER* (2014). In it he included negative criticism of Tony Blair. For doing so he was attacked by Ferdinand Mount, member of Thatcher governments and cousin to David Cameron's mother. The attack in Progress Magazine (UK) seemed incoherent to me but perhaps its significance was that it came from the right of the political spectrum.

viii

It is possible to dip into all sorts and conditions of political memoirs of the time to read differing accounts of how Wilson and his government responded to heavy pressure from the USA to become involved in the (undeclared) war in Vietnam. For a comprehensive account of how Wilson managed to pursue a foreign policy that attempted to keep both the USA and the USSR in balance it is useful to read Geraint Hughes' *Harold Wilson's Cold War: The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964-1970*.