

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Unfinished but posting anyway

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 Labourⁱ 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 Kingⁱⁱ 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 stateⁱⁱⁱ.

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^{iv}. 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^v. 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 and the intention 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.

More on this later.

Cliff Jones 16th. February 2018

END NOTES

i

Here is a link to a piece on New Labour.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/aug/06/society.labour>

ii

Here is a review of King's last book. In the review there is reference to his previous book written with Ivor Crewe. Called *The Blunders of our Governments* it combines despair with laughter.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11524640/Who-Governs-Britain-by-Anthony-King-review.html>

iii

Below is a description of one of the initiatives that came under the Northern Partnership for Records of Achievement. It was a remarkable initiative that brought together 37 LEAs and all of the examination boards that subsequently became AQA. Taking part in the scheme enabled professional educators to think in terms of learning outcomes and appropriate evidence rather than simply scores.

<http://www.aqa.org.uk/programmes/unit-award-scheme/a-brief-history-of-the-aqa-unit-award-scheme-uas>

iv

Gove the educational terrorist.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-10664722>

v

In 1975 Lawrence Stenhouse produced *An Introduction To Curriculum Research And Development*. It was an Open University set book. The Times Educational Supplement called it 'a profoundly important book' and predicted that it would be read widely. That was a time when thinking and experimenting about what and how to teach and what and how to assess were regarded as proper activities for professional educators and when universities appointed professors of curriculum development: a time when at least some educational policy was made on the ground.

Although he began and did much of his work in Scotland it was in England at a time when the Teaching Council was dominated by educators that he became part of, and a force for, professional research activity. He even saw school inspectors as collaborators with and enablers of schoolteachers undertaking research. We have moved far away from that position and now, monitored by inspectors, must hit targets set up by others.

Stenhouse must have been so pleased to have been external examiner for my masters degree! I am and still boast of it.