

## **From illusion to delusion**

### **A review of *Tony Blair, A Journey***

Tony Blair was once thought able to conjure votes out of a hat: an illusionist of incredible charismatic power; but, as his book unconsciously but clearly demonstrates, the more he came to believe in his own powers of leadership the more deluded he became about the rightfulness, even the righteousness, of where he wanted to take us and how we should get there. Afghanistan and Iraq are not the only examples of this. He was the same in domestic policy, including his approach to education. 'Gadarene' is probably the best word to describe his style of leadership; the faster he galloped the more he came to believe that what he was doing was right; he gave himself no choice: he simply had to believe that he was right because he could not see or do things differently.

It is very tempting to write a review that simply makes fun of this book; so many opportunities have been generously provided by the author to ridicule his rhetoric. I shall not entirely resist the temptation to do so but the overriding concern that emerges from the book has to be the very great danger that he continues to present for the World as he carelessly classifies people and countries as terrorist; as he maintains his belief in the right of Western states to intervene and change the governments of countries that he defines as failing states: failing, that is, to fit his template; and as he instructs religions to behave as he would have them behave. His power did not wane upon leaving office in the UK. He now operates globally but without any longer having to explain himself at Prime Minister's Question Time or at the Party Conference. No-one can hold him to account. He now has a lot of un-fettered and unchallenged power to influence; and a lot of money.

He has, for example, been given a role that is supposed to foster peace in the Middle East, in particular between the Palestinians and Israel; but his largely Anglo-Saxon World view leads him to perceive Palestinians in much the same way that any John Wayne Western would have portrayed 'red Indians': the 'good Indians' stay on the reservation (until gold is discovered there and they are moved) while the 'bad Indians' object to the theft of their land and make more arrows to fire against the guns of the soldiers sent to keep them docile. His message to the Palestinians is like a school teacher telling a class that they cannot go home until they have shown that they can sit still in silence; but it only takes one slight disturbance for the detention to be extended; and for teachers who wish to maintain the detention it is very easy to provoke a disturbance.

## The Blairish Language

In order to understand this man it is important to have a working knowledge of the meanings that he gives to the words, terms and phrases that he uses to make his case; and 'case' is the right word because this book has something about it of a defending barrister's final speech to the jury. He desperately wants a 'not guilty' verdict from the reader and so he deploys his words sometimes to dazzle, sometimes to skate over events as quickly and lightly as possible and sometimes he tries to recapture his old ability to convince us that black is white and that wrong is right. The temptation for the reader is to become drawn in and begin to mentally argue with his presentation of facts. But he has the ability to squeeze his own meaning into words that you thought you understood; and just when you thought you had him nailed down on something like the poor academic performance of Academies he has skipped off to another topic leaving behind him an assertion that they are a brilliant success. Rather than engage in argument he prefers to assemble whatever evidence he can find that supports his case and move on quickly.

At one time this ability of his to make a case probably had a lot of the clever vote-winning politician about it but as time went on his self-belief hardened, as he makes clear, so that he became a fundamentalist convert to his own religion. New Labour may have begun as a simple re-branding exercise designed to win votes but for him it is now *the one and only true religion*: he is a believer in and a proselytiser for it. Blairish is not simply the language of New Labour; it also part of its liturgy.

I want to look at just a little of this language.

### 'Get it'

Throughout the book he uses this phrase to distinguish between those people who follow the new religion and those who don't. Jack Straw, for example, is a true believer: he 'gets it', so do most of those that were invited to sit on his sofa to make policy and, especially, the extravagantly praised Andrew Adonis. The old Labour Party is, however, not a believer and so 'does not get it'. In fact the Labour Party comes across in this book as the enemy at whom he was aiming. Gordon Brown was once thought by Blair to 'get it' but as time goes by Blair becomes convinced that Brown was never a true believer and so he never really 'got it'; hence Blair's desperation to stay at the helm so that changes such as Academies (he refers to such retreats from socialism as 'reforms') would be embedded into the fabric of the school system and could not be removed as he suspected Brown and Ed Balls wished to do. For Blair the fact that after he vacated its leadership the Party lost the next General Election is entirely due to its failure to follow the righteous path of New Labour: its apostasy brought forth ruin. He really believes this.

## **'Aspiration'**

This is one of the things that non-believers do not 'get'. You might have expected a socialist to use a word such as 'fulfilment' and to have accompanied it with the word 'fairness' in the belief that fulfilment for all cannot come about if we live in a society that is unfair. Tony Blair, however, tells us that he is an admirer of people who get to the top. He says that he likes their spirit and enjoys their company; people like Berlusconi. For him the process of getting to the top means competition rather than co-operation. In other words, there has to be a top and, so that you will know when you have got there, a bottom. Reading about his approach to becoming leader of the Labour Party: his ruthless determination to get the top job and his unselfconscious use of the word 'elite'; and noticing the number of times that he makes use of the words 'leader' and 'leadership' I was reminded of his intention at one time to close down every school that was judged to be below average. For him the only good schools are those whose leaders have led them to the top of the league. Who was it, I wonder, who pointed out to him that the children and teachers of the schools that would be forced to close because they were judged to be below average would then have to go to the schools that remained open and were judged to be above average and that doing this every year would eventually mean only one huge school left standing? You can't provide education for all on the basis of a competitive market place; not if you wish to be fair. And it never crosses his mind that there might be something wrong with the way that we set about measuring performance.

What does he have to say about Estelle Morris who resigned as Secretary of State for Education? According to him she is one of those people who are simply not fit for the top jobs. He takes no regard of the fact that she had to work with a boss (him) who was pushing policy in a direction that was the opposite of what had been agreed by the Party. He was lucky that she did nothing to build up opposition to him within the Party; an opposition that would have been based upon long-held, agreed and well-tested socialist values. She and the Party did not want university tuition fees or Academies but he did. He knows that he was a good leader because he could change his mind when it suited him and defeat his own Party. He seems to despise her and them for not fighting him hard enough.

His definition of 'aspiration' is underpinned by his belief that some are fit to rise and some are not. His book reminded me uncomfortably of Mussolini's belief that might must be right. There is also something Messianic about the book: 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man'. Tony Blair believes he was that man, especially after 9/11; he also believes that now that he is released from domestic constraints he can expand and expound on a global scale and he will be that man once again.

## **'Modernisation' and 'Re-structuring'**

Blair loves the word 'modernisation' and uses it extensively to demarcate between the 'old' who don't agree with him and the 'new' that do. 'Re-structuring'

goes with modernisation. To be a moderniser like him it is important not to have too much ideological baggage otherwise you cannot twist and turn and alter the meaning of, for example, the party manifesto or the promises that you made in order to get elected. So, the Party said that it would not introduce tuition fees; so, the Party promised that school standards were more important than changing the structure of the school system; but, in a Blairish blink, both of what were thought to be absolute commitments are thrown overboard when he labels them as holding back progress towards his idea of a 'modern' world. In effect 'modern' is simply a label that he applies to almost anything of which he approves.

In fact, the 'blink' on tuition fees took quite a time and brought him close to an enforced resignation; but the eagerness with which he describes the fight against 'Old Labour' on this issue might lead you to believe that fighting was what he loved best. Certainly winning such fights seems to have confirmed his self-belief to a dangerous extent.

The other advantage that his use of 'modernisation' gives him is the opportunity to shed old clothes and steal those of his opponents. The Conservatives cannot attack him because he so clearly presents himself as at least partially the heir of Thatcher and also of Heseltine: she the destroyer of the post-war political consensus so that markets could be opened up to the greedy; and he the highly energised spirit of entrepreneurship: activity with a purpose that requires no justification except that it should bring about change and movement. Thatcher and Heseltine could not work together but, despite trying to create a distance between Thatcherism and himself, the way that he writes about them both shows that Blair sees himself as combining their characteristics. He is right; he does.

### **'Normal'**

This is his word for himself. 'I am normal', he tells us. Maybe this is why he introduces the reader to his sex life with Cherie and explains his lavatorial preferences: he needs us to accept him as one of us. It may seem strange that someone who continually emphasises his exceptional qualities as a leader, possessing both vision and determination, should also need to be legitimised as 'normal'. My guess is that he actually sees himself as the centre: the norm. This means that those that do not recognise and acknowledge his position must either be convinced or defeated. If he is 'normal'; if the position that he occupies is that which gives him the power to see more clearly than the rest of us; if he knows what is best for us even when we do not 'get it'; then those of us who do not accept his views are simply *not normal*. There is something wrong with us. We are out of step even when we are in the majority; maybe *especially* when we are in the majority because he so much regards himself as the seer of truth who has to lead us where we do not yet realise that we must go. The Roman Catholic Church used to refer to this quality as 'religious intuition'; the power to know a truth beyond rational thought and expert opinion.

Students of the kinds of illnesses that can infect political leaders will recognise this condition as will those who are familiar with 'democratic centralism'. After restricted discussion and decision-making on the sofa in No.10, confined to those that 'get it', the next step is what Lenin called 'unity of action'. No more questions are allowed because Blair and his band of followers have arrived at what was known during his time as a 'government given': the norm, *his* 'norm', has been established and from it will emerge a target. I don't think that this can be compared with, for example, 'kitchen cabinets' of the past that indulged in a bit of political stitching up and moaning about colleagues. Blair went to extreme lengths to ensure that policy targets were 'delivered' by people who were 'on-message'. Alastair Campbell may have famously said that New Labour did not 'do God' but the religious similarities are obvious.

Perhaps when he studied jurisprudence Blair came across Kelsen's notion of the *grundnorm*, a kind of basic origin from which all laws might be held to emanate: an imagined law that tells us, rather unnecessarily, to accept the notion of law itself: we must obey law because we can suppose a law that says we must. If you believe that we need to have such a thing as a *grundnorm* then it is probably not a good idea to ask any critical questions; rather like Tom and Jerry who, when they have run off the edge of a cliff, remain safe until they look down and see that there is no ground beneath their feet: that their *grundnorm* was only imaginary. Then they fall. Blair has yet to look down. He still believes that he stands firmly upon a *grundnorm* of his own making. He will not ask critical questions about where he stands because he has faith in himself.

The Emperor's New Clothes also come to mind.

### **'Intellectual'**

This word is used a lot in the book, especially when he wishes the reader to appreciate the brain power of some of his followers and fellow believers. For him, though, an intellectual is someone who belongs in the New Labour Church and is able to see a target clearly and work out how to reach it. He really likes the Michael Barber approach to doing things and particularly praises his book *Instruction to Deliver*. Barber also co-authored for McKinsey's *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top* (2007). This has had an enormous influence on UK government education policy and led politicians to simplistically assume that the better the school teacher (Barber uses the word 'instructor') the better the result. This meant that Blair could discount the effect of an unfair society upon the education and performance of children and not bother about the flaws in our means of measuring performance. You will not be surprised that Michael Gove has the same view of Michael Barber or that he quotes Blair in support of policies that will differentiate children, parents and society. Blair's intellectual is not somebody who is unsure or makes use of different perspectives. The true believers set the policy, decide the target and,

brushing aside democracy, differences and dissent, push all the square pegs through the round holes.

In my view Blair is extremely anti-intellectual. He claims that his seven years as a practising barrister gave him a wide experience of life. What those years did not give him, however, was any understanding of how to look at and respect evidence. The picture he gives us of himself as a young barrister learning from his pupil master to scrupulously and intensively analyse opinion and evidence is scarcely credible given the way that he worked as prime minister. I suggest that it is impossible to claim the title of 'intellectual' if you spend your time looking *for* evidence to make a case. Hans Blix was looking *at* and *among* the evidence relating to possible weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in order to decide what the evidence signified but Blair only wanted him to look *for* and to *find* evidence that supported his case. In the education sphere schools and teachers must either find evidence that they are hitting their targets or be forced to wear a highly visible label that tells the World that they are failing. This is not only anti-intellectual but it is also anti-educational; even anti-societal.

### **'Progressive'**

This is a word that he is very keen to attach to himself and his beliefs. His approach to taxation is, however, very *regressive*. Those aspiring entrepreneurs of whom he is so fond, the celebrity friends who provide his holiday retreats, the multi millionaire donors and the bankers with bonuses must not, he tells us, be restrained. He repeatedly says that higher taxes on the rich are a bad thing. He is not at all interested in making any kind of case for higher taxes for those that can most afford them: in the name of *progression* he gives us *regression*. Who does he think takes up the taxation burden avoided by the rich?

### **'America'**

He actually means the U.S.A. when he uses this word.

Maybe you can remember when D.C. Comics introduced *The Justice League of America* consisting of super heroes such as Superman, Batman and Green Lantern. There was a spin-off called *The Justice League of Europe* which fought against a group of super villains called *The Extremists*. Reading what Blair has to say about 'America' makes me wonder if he sees himself as being a member of both of these Justice Leagues.

His reaction to 9/11 was to immediately assume that all had changed; bets were now off; the rule book could be thrown away; war had been declared; 'they' are the 'baddies' and 'we' are the 'goodies'. The fight now is for 'freedom' and 'justice' and to bring to the World all that 'America' stands for. He skates very lightly over, for example, the bad behaviour of U.S. and British troops and interrogators in Afghanistan and Iraq and finds ways to set them in a context that

makes it seem less awful; but he makes sure to emphasise that 'they' are evil and out to get us if 'we' don't get our retaliation in first. We may kill a few innocent people in this battle but, he believes, they will thank us for it one day. The trouble with declaring war against an abstract noun such as 'terror' is that it is never going to be settled with a formal armistice. Just in case readers might think that he is a mite callous, however, he makes sure to tell us that he does agonise about what has happened. Regrets? He has a few; but none that will seriously hold him back or change his mind.

## **A few personal irritants**

I want to mention some personal irritants arising partly from where I live. You may not share my annoyance but if you happen to live and work in the North of England then maybe you will be sympathetic to what Blair would probably see as a chip on my shoulder. John Prescott has, he informs us, several chips on his shoulders.

### **'Fookin'**

Most of the time Blair shies away from 'bad language' and instead coyly makes use of asterisks to stand in for the last three letters of 'four letter words'; but at one point he puts this 'word' into the mouth of John Prescott. Never in his life has Prescott or anyone else in the parts of England in which Prescott has lived and worked pronounced 'fuckin' as 'fookin'. Neither, to emphasise the point, has anyone in the North of England ever described going to a Cup Final as going 'oop for t' coop'. This is the sort of careless and casual caricature of northerners that intensely irritates millions of people because it amounts to being patronised by the posh who fail to recognise a proper vowel sound when they hear it. His attitude to Prescott and those like him seems to be that they can be tolerated, even admired, while they serve a purpose such as keeping the unions and the left wing quiet and they are, he seems to be saying, salt of the earth working class people; but of course they are unlikely to be admitted to full membership of the new religion. The best that they can hope for is to be altar boys. No matter where Blair was born or went to school; no matter that he was a fully paid up member of the Labour Party; and no matter how far from the South of England was the constituency that he represented he sometimes uses the language and demonstrates the views of a very small and select enclave of privileged people.

He also refers to his wife Cherie as 'a Liverpool girl', implying something rough, tough and endearingly working class. She is not from Liverpool and to think of Liverpool in those terms is to seriously misunderstand it. She was brought up and went to a selective school so far from Liverpool that there was another town to travel through before she could get there. I think that he simply wishes to stick an easily recognisable label on her, as he does with other subjects throughout the book. If you label people, countries, events, arguments and religions as he continuously does then you can use them to support your argument. My point is

that what is paramount for him is to make a case and falsely stereotyping his own wife and Liverpool causes him no problems. When, I wonder, was the last occasion that he spent any appreciable time in the place in which she grew up and went to school; or in Liverpool for that matter.

## **Style of writing**

The Blairish writing style is best described as 'gushing'. At times it is like reading a school magazine article by a new sixth former who has just discovered the colon and the exclamation mark; and sex!!! I think he may have been listening too much to his children because there is that slight flavour of a middle aged parent attempting to engage with the mobile texting generation and far too much use of 'guy' and 'guys', sometimes when describing senior diplomats who would probably recoil from such an informal and obvious Americanism.

The way that he deploys the colon is very indicative of the way he operates. He almost always uses it to set up an argument by putting words into the mouths of others which he can then refute; reminiscent of the classical straw man argument.

I am reminded of the way that New Labour used to carry out consultations. The questions would be phrased so that respondents who did not agree were placed in the position of choosing the least worst option rather than one which, left to themselves, they would have preferred; very manipulative. He even uses this technique in order to put words into his own mouth: words that he hopes convince the reader that he had actually uttered at the time. He is a very facile writer.

## **Lies, conviction or Blairite truth?**

Blair really does not like being called a liar. So how does he escape that charge when he is accused of, for example, lying about the capacity of Saddam Hussein to attack us with weapons of mass destruction within forty five minutes? In furtherance of his attempt to present himself as a conviction politician he says that this was something he genuinely believed at the time which subsequently turned out to have been wrong. Quite possibly his rush to gush and his glibness with words prevented him from reflecting on what he was doing at the time and what he is writing about in the book. But the sheer magnitude of the forty five minute claim ought to have alerted him to the need for very careful checking. It is shameful that the Cabinet, a majority of the Labour Party old and new, the Conservative Party and much of the media swallowed a claim that millions of dissenters and demonstrators could see was simply hogwash. The question here is not about the veracity or stupidity of Blair but about the willingness of so many people in positions of power and influence to collude in the delusion. If we like to be deluded then we certainly got the right prime minister in Blair.



He now tells us that the claim was based upon a mistake so has he unconsciously identified himself to his readers as stupid: as someone who gullibly accepted misinformation without asking serious questions? It might seem that the only choices we have when judging what he said on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction are that either he lied about what the information signified or that he was stupid enough to believe what was, at best, extremely doubtful. But maybe there really is a 'third way' approach to Blairite truth. I think that what he does is to dress up evidence to win a case; and that this comes so naturally to him that he really cannot see it like others do. He is extremely concerned in the book to refute the BBC suggestion that evidence was 'sexed up' to support the case for war but it is very clear that this is actually what happened. If dressing up evidence is how he works then he was right to have got out of the legal profession because the consequences of exaggerating evidence to the extent of falsification can be ruinously expensive to your clients when you are found out. On the other hand, it occurs to me that this could be very lucrative for him because he would, no doubt, have taken the case through every appeal court.

## **A judgment**

Should the jury find him 'not guilty'? Has he managed to convince us that he deserves a better image and leaves an admirable legacy?

We learn from his writing that, contrary to popular belief, he is actually interested in history. Weekending at Chequers he seems to be constantly dipping into the diaries and accounts of previous prime ministers. This, I think, is all part of his attempt to see and present himself as part of history: a major player in the tableau of 'Great Men of History'. But he realises that so much of what he did is very difficult for many of us to stomach so he deals with this in three ways, sometimes possibly consciously but often, I think, delusionally.

First he claims credit for taking action on things that he thinks we will approve of even although the credit should go to others. Thus he would have us believe that many of the domestic policies that most close observers have long thought were due to Gordon Brown are to his credit. I note that making the Bank of England independent is one of those policies; much to the amazement of financial journalists who believe that he had little or nothing to do with the policy.

Second is the way that he creates and builds an impression of crisis in the book and seizes upon moments that can be presented to the reader as calling for a saviour. He would have us see 9/11 as his Date with Destiny. This was the moment when he could see more clearly than anyone else that we were in a war of 'good' against 'evil'.

Strangely enough he and I were both in hotels in Brighton (different ones) getting dressed for evening meetings and watching the news on the telly when the pictures appeared of what was happening in New York. He was due to address

the TUC and I was due to give a keynote on aspects of government education policy at the University of Brighton. The same Destiny did not call me. I am afraid that, despite appreciating its horrific nature and extent, I also, unworthily he would think, remembered that the government of New York had very publicly and financially supported a terrorist organisation that had not only killed many people in the UK but had also come very close to wiping out a democratically elected British government as it gathered in that very same Brighton for its party conference. I foolishly assumed that New Yorkers would 'get' this. I also remembered that while illegally cruising in Iranian waters in support of Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran, a war that was fully and enthusiastically supported by the U.S.A. and the U.K., a U.S. destroyer had taken aim at and brought down a civilian Iranian airliner carrying pilgrims to Mecca. I was very mistaken in thinking that Americans would reflect upon this. In fact the captain was subsequently awarded a medal. I even had time to recall when, sitting with a colleague in my hotel room in Tel Aviv, we heard on the television news Bill Clinton enthusiastically endorse and greet as a huge opportunity for peace Yasser Arafat's repetition of his recognition of the State of Israel, only to fly back to the U.S.A. to be confronted by the Monica Lewinsky scandal. His reaction was to distract his detractors by finding a reason to bomb Iraq which then threatened to launch rockets at Israel leading to the end of that chance of an agreement between the Palestinians and Israel.

My naïve response to 9/11 was that, no matter how shocked and justified the immediate reaction might be to having been unexpectedly and viciously attacked, this would lead to some sober reflection upon the way the U.S.A. approached and pursued foreign policy; after all, many countries had had to cope with and learn the lessons of similar and much worse atrocities, sometimes at the hands of those two countries. My mindset was clearly very different from Blair's. From that point on he saw himself as a true Superhero who was going to save the World and teach it to accept the values of America.

For this member of the jury he made the wrong choice after 9/11. Being a Superhero plays to his vision of himself and has helped to construct a celebrity brand that now brings in a lot of money. He would, however, have done his America a better service had he attempted the far more difficult task of pointing out that its imperialism was harmful both to the rest of the World and also to itself.

His third way of trying to convince the jury is to attack the media. He wants us to realise that a lot of the nasty things that have been said about him come from people who would rather tell and sell a story than take the trouble to see things his way. In this he comes across as the jilted lover. After all, he was, at one time, extremely happy to sleep with the Murdoch media and any other passing newspaper or media outlet. The problem was that he thought that they had genuinely fallen in love with him and adopted his religion. In fact their interest in him as a provider of stories overrode any short-lived attachment to his beliefs.

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.

**The book is published by Hutchinson**

You might also wish to read ***The Values of New Labour: a discursion on its approaches to schooling in England and to government and politics in general.*** Click the following link to read it:

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