

Bush's Zombie Shuffles Off

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Adieu, Blair, Adieu

Tony Blair's success was limited to winning three general elections in a row. A second-rate actor, he turned out to be a crafty and avaricious politician, but without much substance; bereft of ideas he eagerly grasped and tried to improve upon the legacy of Margaret Thatcher. But though in many ways Blair's programme has been a euphemistic, if bloodier, version of Thatcher's, the style of their departures is very different. Thatcher's overthrow by her fellow-Conservatives was a matter of high drama: an announcement outside the Louvre's glass pyramid during the Paris Congress brokering the end of the Cold War; tears; a crowded House of Commons.

Blair makes his unwilling exit against a backdrop of car-bombs and mass carnage in Iraq, with hundreds of thousands left dead or maimed from his policies, and London a prime target for terrorist attack. Thatcher's supporters described themselves afterwards as horror-struck by what they had done. Even Blair's greatest sycophants in the British media: Martin Kettle and Michael White (The Guardian), Andrew Rawnsley (Observer), Philip Stephens (FT) confess to a sense of relief as he finally quits.

A true creature of the Washington Consensus, Blair was always loyal to the various occupants of the White House. In Europe, he preferred Aznar to Zapatero, Merkel to Schroeder, was seriously impressed by Berlusconi and, most recently, made no secret of his desire that Sarkozy was his candidate in France. He understood that privatisation/deregulation at home were part of the same mechanism as the wars abroad. If this judgement seems unduly harsh let me quote Sir Rodric Braithwaite, a former senior adviser to Blair, writing in the Financial Times on 2, August, 2006:

"A spectre is stalking British television, a frayed and waxy zombie straight from Madame Tussaud's. This one, unusually, seems to live and breathe. Perhaps it comes from the Central Intelligence Agency's box of technical tricks, programmed to spout the language of the White House in an artificial English accent...

Mr Blair has done more damage to British interests in the Middle East than Anthony Eden, who led the UK to disaster in Suez 50 years ago. In the past 100 years--to take the highlights--we have bombed and occupied Egypt and Iraq, put down an Arab uprising in Palestine and overthrown governments in Iran, Iraq and the Gulf. We can no longer do these things on our own, so we do them with the Americans. Mr Blair's total identification with the White House has destroyed his influence in Washington, Europe and the Middle East itself: who bothers with the monkey if he can go straight to the organ-grinder?..."

This, too, is mild compared to what is said about Blair in the British Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. Senior diplomats have told me on more than one occasion that it would not upset them too much if Blair were to be tried as a war criminal. More cultured critics sometimes compare him to the Cavaliere Cipolia, the vile hypnotist of fascist Italy, so brilliantly portrayed in Thomas Mann's

1929 novel 'Mario and the Magician'. Blair is certainly not Mussolini, but like the Duce he enjoyed to simultaneously lead and humiliate his supporters.

What much of this reveals is anger and impotence. There is no mechanism to get rid of a sitting Prime Minister unless his or her party loses confidence. The Conservative leadership decided that Thatcher simply had to go because of her negative attitude to Europe. Labour tends to be more sentimental towards its leaders and in this case they owed so much to Blair that nobody close to him wants to be cast in the role of Brutus. In the end he decided to go himself. The disaster in Iraq had made him a much hated politician and slowly support began to ebb. One reason for the slowness was that the country is without a serious opposition. In Parliament, the Conservatives simply followed Blair. The Liberal-Democrats were ineffective. Blair had summed up Britain's attitude to Europe at Nice in 2000:

"It is possible, in our judgement, to fight Britain's corner, get the best out of Europe for Britain and exercise real authority and influence in Europe. That is as it should be. Britain is a world power."

This grotesque, self-serving fantasy that 'Britain is a world power' is to justify that it will always be EU/UK. The real union is with Washington. France and Germany are seen as rivals for Washington's affections, not potential allies in an independent EU. The French decision to re-integrate themselves into NATO and pose as the most vigorous US ally was a serious structural shift which weakened Europe. Britain responded by encouraging a fragmented political order in Europe through expansion and insisted on a permanent US presence on the continent.

Blair's half-anointed, half-hated successor, Gordon Brown, is far more intelligent (he reads books) but politically no different. There might be a change of tone, but little else. It is a grim prospect with or without Blair and an alternative politics (anti-war, anti-Trident, defence of public services) is confined to the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales. Its absence nationally fuels the anger felt by substantial sections of the population, reflected in voting (or not) against those in power.

Tariq Ali's new book, Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope, is published by Verso.

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