

Lobster 60

Gordon Brown: in the country of the blind.....

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Not so long ago the end of a government would be marked by the publication of a couple of ministerial diaries and some memoirs trickling into the public domain within 2-3 years of its demise. Today any change of administration is followed immediately by a slew of books, as its participants cash in with lucrative publishing deals and get their version of history into print as quickly as possible. Thus has the demise of Labour in May 2010 been marked. The accounts that have appeared include the absurdly self-centred, stating-the-obvious-at-all-times tales of Peter Mandelson; the fantastic, optimistic and daytime TV-oriented (and thus immensely popular) narrative of Tony Blair; Jonathan Powell's treatise on Machiavellianism; and the diarised compendium of sad little stories from Chris Mullin, as he crept away from the political stage after 2005. A particularly interesting work, though, is that written by Deborah Mattinson, a major courtier to New Labour and an observer of many of its foibles and obsessions over 15 years.¹

From the North East of England, she originally worked in advertising, joining the Labour Party in 1983 at the age of 27. Her major role began in 1985, when she was approached by Philip Gould, with whom she formed a 'political consultancy' at

¹ Peter Mandelson, *The Third Man*; Tony Blair, *A Journey*; Jonathan Powell, *The New Machiavelli – How to Wield Power in the Modern World*; Chris Mullin, *Decline and Fall*; and Deborah Mattinson, *Talking to a Brick Wall*. All published 2010.

a time when Neil Kinnock was casting around for assistance to rejuvenate his party's electoral prospects. Her account of her high-level involvement in the Labour Party over the following 25 years is candid and non-partisan, and she makes the valuable point of identifying Neil Kinnock as a neglected figure whose hard work in making Labour 'electable' is usually forgotten.

She also gently reminds the reader that the need to attract middle class voters in London and the South East was not a strategy devised for the first time by Tony Blair and his acolytes at some point in the mid 90s; it was first raised formally in a pamphlet as long ago as 1921 by Herbert Morrison, and remained a central part of Labour's electoral strategy from that point onwards, albeit one that might have been neglected.

However, possibly due to limited street level political experience on her part, Mattinson lacks a certain perspective while making many of her otherwise correct points. The role of the SDP in disastrously splitting the anti-Conservative vote in 1983 and 1987 is not mentioned at all; nor are the very real difficulties for any major political party, led by even the most gifted leader, to get back into government after a severe defeat (such as suffered by Labour in 1983 or the Conservatives in 1997) under the current first-past-the-post system.

In this context, and accepting that her book is not a political history of the period, it would have been of some value for her to have sketched out over a page or two the various events that triggered the launch of the SDP in 1981: particularly the machinations of James Callaghan in the late 60s and the Trotskyite 'Broad Left' from the early 70s, as well as the leadership ambitions of Michael Foot. Instead, the reader is dropped straight into a narrative in which she deplores how 'out of touch' Labour were with 'ordinary people'

in the 80s (which may have been true at that point), without demonstrating that Thatcher and the Tory right were ever more 'in touch' or commanded a consensus of views (they didn't), or that Thatcher would have won so easily without the SDP.

Although Mattinson's admiration of Kinnock is clearly genuine, as well as omitting the very basic electoral arithmetic that ultimately explains his failure to win in 1992, she also fails to address other issues that may have held him back. Would the English electorate (85% of the UK total) ever have warmed significantly to a small, balding, verbose Welshman? Can any political group that needs to draw support from across the UK be led effectively by an individual clearly identified with a peripheral region of the country?² Given her professional experience in advertising and as a pollster, her lack of comment on these matters is odd.

In 1992 Kinnock, who had a great interest in polling data and focus groups, gave way to John Smith, who did not. He attended (privately) one such gathering and dismissed its value afterwards by telling Mattinson, 'These people are Tories.' Suddenly out of demand, she started her own company, Opinion Leader Research, and was only fully employed again with Labour Party work after Smith's untimely demise and replacement by Tony Blair in 1994. A major reason for this resurgence in her fortunes was due to the contacts she had developed with Gordon Brown from the late '80s onwards. Brown, it turns out, was even keener on market research than Kinnock and her book is very much an account of her work with him until 2010.

Her relationship with Brown follows a familiar trajectory: initial flattery; being made to feel valued; charmed by his wit and demeanour; constant consultations and being regularly commissioned to carry out important tasks. Clearly she was an important figure in the Brown constellation. But roll forward

² Would France elect a Breton President?

ten years and the telephone calls and e-mails from her are ignored; he stares silently out of the window when she delivers a report he has commissioned; she attends meetings which conclude when he leaves the room without saying anything; he walks past her at an important public event whilst ostentatiously greeting others. She is regarded as having 'changed sides' and contact with her is reduced to nil.

From a wide range of sources,³ the accounts of Brown's curious behaviour and how much it was a factor in his conduct as prime minister – *de facto* from 1997 and actual from 2007 – need to be considered in some detail if we are to make any sense of Mattinson's book (and the many other narratives now appearing), the Labour Party's current predicament and the present and likely future political landscape of the UK.

The man

Although a complete biography of Gordon Brown has yet to be written, the basic details of his background and rise are well known.⁴ Brown was born into a solidly middle class family that had no obvious political connections or affiliations. He did well extremely well at school, reaching Edinburgh University at the age of 16. Here he took a BA and an MA in History and moved in rather elevated social circles, his first steady girlfriend being Princess Margarita of Romania, a cousin of the Duke of Edinburgh.

He joined the Labour Party in 1969; and in 1971 made his *entrée* into public debate, writing a lengthy piece in the Edinburgh University student newspaper about the dispute at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders,⁵ a workers' occupation of five state-owned shipyards on the Clyde. Treasury officials in London had refused to sanction a £5m funding package to tide them over a period of slack orders, therefore threatening the yards

³ See the series of articles in *The Times* 16-20 November 2010.

⁴ The best so far is Tom Bower's *Gordon Brown* (2004)

⁵ See Bower pp. 17-18.

with closure and the workers with mass redundancies. This article indicated that Brown, even at this early stage, had a conformist, centre-right outlook. He inveighed against the political left, radical shop stewards and 'liberal documentary makers', seeing them as a distraction from what was properly a local matter which Scottish people alone should try and resolve. He also said that the dispute would fail. He was wrong; and Jimmy Reid, the (Communist) shop steward, who led and planned the occupation, was proved right. The Treasury figures were not reliable; the amount of money needed to support the yards was relatively minor; support of this type was common in other industrial countries; and most of the facilities deserved to be saved. In early 1972 the Heath government, too, came around to this view. Reid became popular across Scotland following his success in saving Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, so much so that in 1972 he was elected Rector of Glasgow University.⁶

Early career

Possibly in emulation of Reid, Brown decided to run as a student candidate for the position of Rector of Edinburgh University. He was not the first student candidate for this office,⁷ and although he encountered considerable opposition within Edinburgh's 'establishment', his campaign was successful. His period of office ran from 1973 to 1976 and, together with his extracurricular activities as a WEA tutor, raised his profile significantly in Labour Party circles in the area. In the late summer of 1974 Brown attempted and failed to get selected as prospective parliamentary candidate (PPC)

⁶ Reid failed in three subsequent attempts to enter Parliament: as Communist candidate in Central Dunbartonshire in 1974 (both elections) and as Labour candidate in Dundee East in 1979. He finished his political career as a member of the SNP. Two of the Upper Clyde shipyards are still open and trading profitably. Many thousands of jobs were saved by Reid's decision to fight the Treasury.

⁷ The first student rector was Jonathan Wills.

for Edinburgh South, a Conservative-held marginal that Labour could hope to win in a good year.

Not downhearted by this rejection, he added to his credentials by editing a collection of essays, *The Red Paper on Scotland*, in 1975.⁸ In late 1976 Brown (by now employed as a lecturer in politics at the Glasgow College of Technology) was finally chosen as the Labour candidate for Edinburgh South, when the seat came up for selection again. He was 25 years old and, given opinion polls at the time, would have considered it possible that he could have won the seat had an election been called in late 1978.

Now regarded as a rising star by the Scottish Labour Party, Brown was twice offered safer alternative constituencies after this. He declined to run in the Hamilton South bye-election in May 1978 (George Robertson was selected and elected instead) and also declined Leith when a last minute vacancy arose in February 1979 (he was unable to make up his mind). The seat went instead to Ron Brown.⁹

With hindsight these were clearly significant miscalculations. Although Callaghan duly took Labour down to an arguably unnecessary defeat by delaying going to the country until May 1979, ensuring that that Brown failed to win Edinburgh South, Brown would have been elected in either of the other seats. Had this happened, British political history, and the subsequent history of the Labour Party, might have been very different.

⁸ The authors of the various pieces Brown edited included: Tom Nairn, now an advocate of European integration, a republican and sometime editor of the *New Left Review*; Jim Sillars MP who left the Labour Party in 1976 and is now a member of the SNP; Robin Cook MP and Vincent Cable MP. Interestingly, none of these figures took the same political journey as Brown in later years.

⁹ Ron Brown was regarded as dangerous, unstable and too left-wing by the Scottish Labour establishment. But with hindsight his views on Afghanistan (the real danger came not from Russia but from Islamic extremists) and Libya (there should be a rapprochement with Gaddafi) have both been endorsed by events.

Despite Callaghan's error, and even allowing for the leadership of Michael Foot from late 1980, *and* the launch of the SDP a few months later, things still looked retrievable for the Labour Party between 1979 and 1982. Margaret Thatcher did badly in the opinion polls throughout this period and it remained possible therefore to think of Labour returning to government in 1983-1984. Against this backdrop Brown continued to advance. In 1980 he left academia and became current affairs editor for Scottish TV, while writing a regular column for the *Scottish Daily Record*. In 1981 he was selected as PPC for the Labour seat of Dunfermline East, and was elected MP in the May 1983 general election.

Into opposition

The collapse of the Labour position in 1982-1983, the 'Falklands effect', and the significant role played by the SDP in gifting Thatcher an enormous majority, meant that Brown entered the House of Commons facing many years of opposition rather than the prospect of ascent to early ministerial office.

In these reduced circumstances, Brown seems to have spent the period between 1983 and 1987 considering solutions to Labour's electoral predicament while strengthening his position amongst his parliamentary colleagues. His extensive reading about recent UK political history, and, possibly, his own experiences (between 1974 and 1983) indicated to him that when in government, or seeking government, the Labour Party generally ran into difficulties by – in no particular order here – alienating the City of London; failing to have an amicable working relationship with the Treasury and its all-powerful mandarins; behaving awkwardly toward the media and hence both creating and enduring media hostility; and often showing indifference toward to the US. By the late 80s Brown's approach to these

problems consisted of ingratiating the Labour Party with the City of London; adhering to the Treasury rules about public spending and privatisation; promising the deregulation of the mass media; and working closely with senior US figures at every juncture, taking their advice and implementing their requests. Brown was not solely responsible for this *volte-face*; but he was certainly part of a powerful group within the PLP, led by John Smith, who were comfortable with this position.¹⁰

This striking reversal by Brown of the arguments that he had seemingly endorsed in *The Red Paper on Scotland* only eight years earlier clearly looks driven by expediency: when it appeared Labour could win with 'conventional' centre-left politics Brown was in favour of these (or at least of aligning himself with them). After 1983, when it was considered that the reverse was true, Brown duly modified his position.¹¹

While his views on how Labour should radically reposition itself within UK politics coalesced, after an initial period of carefully studying and getting to know his colleagues, Brown also engaged in a lengthy charm offensive within the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) to mark himself out as a major figure and ensure a body of support for his bid – when the time came – for its leadership. His success was unparalleled: in the PLP parliamentary committee elections he finished as follows: 1988 (1st), 1989 (1st), 1990 (2nd), 1991 (1st), 1992 (1st), 1993 (4th), 1994 (3rd) and 1995 (3rd).

¹⁰ A colleague of mine invited Brown to a housing conference in the late '80s, together with a number of banking executives, who specialised in advancing loans for the construction of new housing. Brown spoke, even then, in adoring terms of the role banks played....so much so that it seemed mildly incongruous to the audience.

¹¹ The elephant in the room here is how much were Brown's views influenced by his exposure to US policy groups and forums from the '80s onward? A separate essay would be needed to tackle this. It should be noted that Brown developed, very early on, extremely close US political connections, spent every summer in the US for many years, and by 1991 had been talent spotted by the Bilderberg Group.

During the same period the only other figures to score regular top four positions (to use a football metaphor) were John Smith (fellow Scot), Robin Cook (fellow Scot and Brown's senior tutor at the WEA in the '70s) and Margaret Beckett (an established northern MP who had, to certain extent, inherited the mantle of Barbara Castle). By comparison during the same period Tony Blair managed 4th place in 1989 and 2nd in 1992 but was otherwise not significantly regarded.

The Blair caucus

Brown prospered under Kinnock and advanced further under Smith, to whom he was doggedly loyal. The broadly traditional nature of John Smith's approach to leading the Labour Party after 1992, and Brown's clear position as the anointed successor to Smith, was not universally supported within the PLP. By late 1992 a caucus had been organised around Tony Blair to consider (a) how to further 'modernise' the Labour Party by ending the block vote mechanism enjoyed by trade unions and (b) deflect Brown from his ambitions, on the grounds that Brown did not have the type of personality likely to appeal to the large number of Home Counties and swing voters needed to ensure a stable Labour Government over a reasonable period of time.¹²

Those who met frequently with Blair in this caucus during 1992-1994 were Peter Mandelson (whose media connections eclipsed even Brown's), Jack Dromey (TGWU 'reformer' and husband of Harriet Harman), John Carr (husband of Glenys Thornton, a significant figure in the Co-op Party), Margaret Hodge (*grande dame* of the smart London set with useful connections in local government) and Sally Morgan (Blair's personal secretary and formerly a significant figure in the

¹² See Anthony Seldon, *Blair* (2004) pp. 181-182. Blair is on record as saying 'Gordon is flawed. He thinks he can do no wrong.' Despite this Blair frequently described Brown as 'the best Chancellor this country has ever had' between 1997 and 2001.

British Youth Council, the Foreign Office-organised end of student politics).¹³

Consider the objectives of the Blair faction. A Smith government, by then thought achievable and running, perhaps, from 1996-1997 through to 2000-2001, would probably have had a decent parliamentary majority (though smaller than that won by Blair) and would also have clearly been a centre-right, pro-US administration. It would have been comfortable with a mixed economy and generally similar to the type of government headed by James Callaghan. The Blair group, then, had no ideological aversion to Smith (and Brown) and they certainly didn't discuss anything too complicated....such as hospital construction programmes or environmental issues. Instead their 'beef' was that of ambitious career politicians who felt excluded from Smith's inner circle. Brown threatened a continuation of this, hence the early evidence of this 'Brown-Blair split'. After the disappointment of 1992, when Kinnock's best efforts brought only a modest increase of an extra 35 seats, the Blair group may also have felt that it was still touch and go that Labour could win a majority, and therefore that the Labour Party had to do everything possible to win, including 'thinking the unthinkable'. The admission by Blair in 2010 that even in the early '90s he thought that Brown had an unfortunate personality and that the Labour Party needed a different leadership candidate to replace Smith, one to whom the voters of 'Middle England' could warm, is consistent with this.

Brown hesitates again

The death of John Smith in 1994 and the immediate

¹³ Harman is a member of the Pakenham/Longford family, like the Bennis and the Foots, part of the 'nobility' of the Labour movement. Peter Mandelson, Charles Clarke, Paul Boateng and Trevor Phillips (all significant New Labour figures) were also involved with the British Youth Council.

emergence of a fully-formed Blair campaign badly wrong-footed Brown. As in 1978-1979 he hesitated and, instead of challenging, struck a deal with Blair: Brown would not contest the vacancy and agreed to swing his substantial body of PLP, TU and CLP supporters behind Blair. This would allow Blair to crush Margaret Beckett – the deputy leader – who had entered the race.¹⁴

As for the other possible candidates, Robin Cook appears to have either been too diffident to mount a challenge, or was bought off with promises of high office if he co-operated in the Blair-Brown plan. John Prescott was a more difficult proposition, having his own PLP and trade union supporters. Prescott could not be ignored and was instead mollified with the post of deputy leader, a position from which all real power was then duly stripped out by Blair and Brown. In exchange for this 'deal', Blair agreed to cede to Brown complete control – via the Treasury – of every aspect of UK domestic policies. Essentially Brown would act as prime minister while Blair behaved as president.

Sofa government

Despite the economy having moved out of recession by 1995, and despite Blair having been elected with such an enormous (and unprecedented) majority that he could have pursued any course of action, the Labour government which was elected in May 1997 followed closely the ultra-cautious, centre-right formula that Brown had devised and Blair agreed with. Because of the enormous power conceded to Brown by Blair in 1994, there was also no pretence of proper cabinet government, or even of significant amounts of discussion of

¹⁴ The ease with which Beckett was swept aside is very reminiscent of Callaghan's dismissal of Barbara Castle in 1976.

important issues by the cabinet.¹⁵ The media quickly picked up on this, but trivialised the issue by describing a highly unusual, dubious and undemocratic process as 'sofa government'.

On one issue – the UK joining the Euro – Blair tried to engender a cabinet discussion and decision. (Blair was in favour.) Has this been agreed in 1999-2000, the UK would have had lower interest rates (thus helping manufacturing exports), greater regulation of financial speculation and less exposure – eventually – to the US collapse of 2007/8. Brown blocked it, arguing, absurdly in a country with collective cabinet responsibility, that as control of the economy had been delegated to him, any decision on this would be his alone. He then knocked any factual arguments to one side by declaring the existence of the now famous 'five tests' the UK economy had to meet before it could join the Euro. Debate in the cabinet was sour, inconclusive and carried a clear implication that Brown would campaign publicly against Blair in the referendum needed before the UK could join, with the prospect, therefore, of a 'Labour split'. Blair abandoned his efforts.¹⁶

In the real world – according to Deborah Mattinson's

¹⁵ On the lack of a meaningful role for the remainder of the cabinet see Alistair Darling writing in *The Guardian* 11 September 2010 ('the cabinet actually discussed surprisingly little') and Chris Mullin in *The Sunday Times* 12 September 2010 ('the cabinet rarely ask questions or have discussions, whether on the wars abroad or the privatisation of the Royal Mail').

¹⁶ As shadow chancellor from 1992, Brown initially thought the UK should join the ERM (the precursor of the Euro), not understanding the effect this would have on an overvalued pound and the effect, therefore, on the UK economy. From 1994 Brown was advised by Ed Balls – a *Financial Times* journalist – who advocated letting the Bank of England set interest rates (a policy change also sought by the US) so that the City of London could become more attractive than Europe as a centre of financial trading and speculation. Brown carried this out as soon as he took office in 1997. Was Balls' function to show Brown the ropes? As a history graduate Brown did not necessarily know anything about economics.

focus group activities – the public certainly noticed a lack of progress between 1997 and 2001; a common refrain being ‘we voted for change – but where is it?’ As Brown had accepted the spending plans of the outgoing Major government immediately on taking office in 1997, this was hardly surprising. Mattinson does not make this elementary point.

On the basis that he had been ‘promised’ by Blair in 1994 that he could ascend to the premiership and replace Blair after one parliament, after 2001 Brown made continual demands that Blair should resign so that Brown could ‘take over’. One such conversation even took place when Blair called Brown to ask for some advice in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the US.

Gang culture

Every account of how the 1997-2010 Labour governments functioned is consistent in its portrayal of an internal power struggle between two factions, the Blair gang and the Brown gang. Although the media reported this as a major split between ‘old Labour’ or ‘new Labour’ (or even – stupidly – ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’), there was no major ideological difference between the two groups. Both wanted a deregulated economy, the UK semi-detached from Europe and obedient to the US, and low personal taxes. Neither advocated a written constitution; neither was concerned to introduce the type of resilient and well-funded regional government seen elsewhere in Western economies.

Why didn’t Blair sack Brown? Some commentators see this as evidence that Blair (someone who willingly starts wars!) is averse to personal conflict. The truth is mundane: as a clever, calculating, political careerist he always took the easiest course of action. The easy choice was to leave Brown in place. Brown had a bigger following than Blair in the PLP,

posed as being 'left-wing', and the economy pre-2007 seemed to be gliding along nicely.¹⁷ Under their collective sway, UK industry continued to decline, the equality gap widened and long-term unemployment remained very high. Although spending on health and education did eventually reach average European levels – after Blair had decided to defy Brown on this; Brown had refused to consider the matter¹⁸ – the method chosen, a series of complex leasing arrangements known as the Private Finance Initiative, which Brown insisted on so as not to upset the sacred Treasury definition of public spending, involved ruinously expensive long-term maintenance contracts that were far more damaging to the public finances than a traditional public sector procurement mechanism would have been.

Eventually Blair departed in 2007, his demise finally brought about by a significant proportion of the PLP being angered by his failure to condemn (or even comment on) the latest Israeli incursion into Lebanon, by the poor polling record of Labour after David Cameron had taken over of leader of the Conservative Party, and, possibly, by the loss of Dunfermline and West Fife, the constituency that directly adjoined Brown's seat, in a bye-election in February 2006.

In a display of unprecedented disfunctionality, Brown ascended to the position of Labour Party leader and prime minister without the inconvenience of a contest for either

¹⁷ The easy choice was to go with the US on Iraq and Israel – particularly if you want a subsequent life on the US lecture circuit.

¹⁸ Between 2001 and 2005 Blair considered and rejected setting up a separate Ministry of Finance. This would have reduced the Treasury's role significantly and would have left Brown with little power. It sounds similar to the arrangements put in place by Harold Wilson and George Brown in 1964 with the Department of Economic Affairs....so much for New Labour.

position.¹⁹ The spectacle of a political party with 350 plus MPs being unable to find a single alternative candidate – let alone a range of candidates – to allow a semblance of democratic participation to occur, appears to have been an indication of Brown's capacity for rudeness, arrogance and making enemies. Many figures in the PLP appeared to have taken shelter in the notion that someone better might turn up without them having to do very much; rather as though they were the victims of domestic violence within a marriage that had gone badly wrong, deeply unhappy and fearful, but unable to imagine an existence outside the formal structures to which they were committed.

In the real world the public, who were largely ignored by Brown's supporters, had their own opinions.²⁰ Deborah Mattinson states that the views of one focus group at the time of Brown's final budget in early 2007 were: 'Gordon Brown does not have any fresh ideas and so has to resort to sleight of hand to create a story; and worse, that Gordon Brown, who is universally thought to be very clever, thinks the electorate are stupid....' ²¹

Is this true? Did Brown have 'ideas' in 1997 when he accepted the previous governments spending plans? (Or in the 80s when the blueprint for New Labour involved making radical concessions to every possible powerful adversary that a Labour government might face?) It could be argued that in 2007-2008 the Brown agenda was clearly seen and

¹⁹ Meg Munn MP told a colleague of mine – who is now a member of the Labour NEC – (I paraphrase slightly): 'Look, we know that Gordon is mad, but people don't realise quite how mad he is....if we don't let him be Prime Minister he will destroy the entire Labour Party....'

²⁰ Some commentators – such as Jonathan Powell – have spoken of Brown's use of emotional blackmail to swing people around to supporting him:..he's had such a hard life....disabled, you know...he works so hard...Labour through and through.... . Brown was at great pains to portray himself as a victim, cheated out of his rightful inheritance.

²¹ The public clearly didn't think Brown was clever – but MP's did.

recognised for the first time by the wider public, particularly after Brown failed to regularise his position in the autumn of 2007 by calling a general election.

Indecision again

The 'election that never was' was a particularly strange episode and similar to Callaghan's dithering in 1978. Between August and October 2007 Labour had a 10% lead in the opinion polls. All the advice given to Brown was clear: he should call an election. All the interested parties consulted on this matter were unanimous: although the size of a Labour majority could not be predicted, and was likely to be reduced, it would still be sufficient to keep a Labour government in place with a working majority until 2011-2012.

Brown – who in Mattinson's account is surrounded by US advisers and even calls an ailing Senator Edward Kennedy at one point to ask if a general election should be called in the UK – decided against an autumn 2007 general election.²² Why? The critical issue appears to have been that he did not feel that he would be guaranteed an increased majority (a ludicrous notion for any party seeking a fourth term) and that the post-election recriminations, therefore, about the reduction in Labour's majority, and the loss of loyal colleagues etc, would weaken his position within the Labour Party vis-à-vis the increasingly bitter Blair team. The bleak conclusion reached from Mattinson and others is that Brown's decisive considerations were based entirely on internal Labour Party jockeying for power, and on him remaining prime minister for as long as possible (like Callaghan in 1978-1979), regardless

²² How incongruous is this? Asking a US Senator when to call a general election in the UK? (Kennedy advised Brown to call one.) Perhaps we shouldn't be too critical of Brown: after all Cameron discussed the latest UK defence reductions with President Obama before announcing them to the House of Commons. Perhaps such arrangements are now normal.

of the prospect of going down at a later date to a catastrophic defeat, losing the entire Labour agenda in the process and handing over the UK to a severe programme of cuts.

Perhaps too loyal to draw this conclusion, Mattinson also mentions that Brown was obsessed throughout his career with searching for slogans and PR initiatives that could 'fix' an argument or situation in his favour.²³ This continued when he was prime minister, when he does not appear to have realised that with a majority of sixty he could and should have been implementing bold policies that had a direct impact on peoples' lives. This does not mean that Brown had no views, or even that his views were reactionary. Rather, as became clear after 2007, his views were so cautious and generalised that they could have been held by many people within mainstream UK politics, irrespective of their political affiliation.

On a personal level, he appeared an uninspiring and drab individual, proceeding everywhere (even to the front line in Afghanistan) in the same business suit; and intoning with great formality, symbolic pauses and faux gravity, entirely predictable replies to all questions in a way that was irritatingly 'respectable'. It was also possible to detect an immense arrogance in his conduct: he came across as regarding himself as the perfect encapsulation of Labour Party values and thinking, with any suggestion to the contrary, however mild, being ignored, ridiculed or smartly knocked to one side.

Defeat

Brown duly went down to defeat in May 2010 presiding over a unique collapse in Labour Party support. At its peak in 2002-2003, with the Conservatives in wretched disarray under the leadership of Ian Duncan Smith, there was a feeling abroad

²³ Typical of these were the derided 'British jobs for British workers' and the dull 'I will do my best' on becoming Prime Minister.

that 'New Labour', with its gigantic middle class 'tent', astute use of language and media manipulation, could 'finish off' the Tories and govern in perpetuity.

The position in late 2010 now appears almost a reversal of this. Today Labour has a level of electoral support similar to that achieved in 1983 under Michael Foot and has been reduced to representing sections of Scotland, Wales and the North. The proposed reduction in the number of MP's will affect it much more than any other political party and will make it harder still for it to win a majority in 2014-2015.

The prospect of Scotland drifting away from the Westminster orbit, within the EU and Commonwealth, cannot be discounted. If anything like this were to occur, the number of seats that Labour would need to gain to secure a majority within a parliament that solely consisted of England, Wales and Northern Ireland would be so high that the prospect of a Labour government (of any ideological bent) in the future would be slim. Nor do any of the above scenarios take into account the possibility of a 'yes' vote in the referendum on the introduction of the Alternative Vote system; which, if it occurs, would ensure coalition arrangements – all of which might be centre-right or right wing in complexion, given UK politics – on a permanent basis.

When considering the above possibilities it is important to remember that Labour's current decline arises not from poor organisation, but from the ideological position adopted by Brown and Blair after 1994. This can best be described as a drive to detach the Labour Party from the orthodox, centre-left, social democracy of its sister parties in Europe, and to recast it instead as a free market, centre-right party with a few 'left' trimmings. It is known, for instance, that even if Brown had been re-elected in 2010 he would have pursued a programme of budget cuts not dissimilar to those adopted by Cameron and Clegg, but would have spread them out over a

longer period of time. In this scenario what does the Labour Party stand for?²⁴

Politics as patronage

One of the oddities of contemporary UK politics is how much it resembles the way business was transacted in the 18th century. A system has developed where patronage and privilege appear to count for more than intelligence, life experience and hard work. Groups of young ambitious people cluster around significant 'king makers' (for the New Labour 'project' these appear to have been Peter Mandelson and Siobhain McDonagh MP) in the hope of being ordained as suitable figures to ensure a continuation of the status quo. All the leaders of the three largest political parties, Cameron, Milliband and Clegg, have the same personal backgrounds – Oxbridge/Harvard, a gap year and then full-time politics. None has ever had a real job. One suspects they may not even have had very much 'real' political experience.

In this context it is not clear how many MP's are actually aware of the policies they should be legitimately pursuing; it's almost as if general knowledge and clear personal opinions, are now so unusual as to be regarded as 'anoraky'. It is interesting that it was within this domain that a person of the Brown type blossomed and was commonly referred to as a 'genius' by his fellow MP's.²⁵

In her book Mattinson concludes that politics is now the

²⁴ The current UK public debt is lower than in France (and much lower than in the US) and comparable with Germany – both of which continue to spend more on public services, pensions etc., and neither of which has embarked on a programme of cuts similar to the UK.

²⁵ David Milliband, too, is often called a 'genius'.....without this being apparent to the public. On Brown it is striking that George Galloway and Tony Blair both ended up with similar views – Galloway in the late '70s/early '80s thought Brown good at passing exams but not necessarily intelligent; Blair today describes Brown as being calculating but without intelligence.

opposite of what the public wants. She reaches this view after extensive and continuing discussion with a focus group in Harlow (a key marginal seat) in 2009-2010. Their conclusions are:

- * the media should be closely regulated on how it reports politics so that the public are properly appraised of the nature and context of day-to-day issues;
- * politicians should be regulated about how they approach the media and provide it with information;
- * MP's should have a proper job description;
- * parliamentary candidates must have proper work/real life experience before standing for office;
- * all young people should take part in a compulsory National Community Service scheme.

The chance of any UK government adopting any of these ideas appears remote. It is ironic that a carefully selected and weighted focus group in Harlow in 2010 should be enunciating views on media regulation that graced the agenda of the Bennite left in the early 80s; though, typically, this is a point that Mattinson fails to make and is probably unaware of. Given that Brown considered at length, and had the opportunity to implement, items 3 and 5 in this list but did not do so, Mattinson's much stated admiration for him appears to contradict her own conclusions.

The real point is that the culture within which Brown thrived and was admired is now seen by the public as a significant handicap. Unless Labour can change this, its future as a party of government must be in doubt.

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