

Blair Inc.

Francis Beckett, David Hencke and Nick Kochan

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One of the two reported contributions Tony Blair made to Labour's 2015 election campaign was a speech in support of the European Union. In April the former leader said: 'The referendum will, for the first time since we joined Europe after years of trying unsuccessfully to do so, put exit on the agenda.'

Most Britons were not electors in 1975 and so have never had a say on what was then the Common Market and is now the European Union. This perceived illegitimacy was acknowledged by the Conservatives, Greens and UKIP who all offered voters on May 7 the opportunity of a referendum. But not Labour, which hardly mentioned the EU in the campaign, leaving it to Blair to bang the Brussels drum.

The former Prime Minister's other campaign bestowal was £1,000 to candidates in target seats. Some refused Blair's cash, with Sophie Gardner, Gloucester hopeful and a former RAF officer, saying it would be 'hypocritical' for her to accept Mr Blair's donation because of her decision to criticise the Iraq war.

Europe and money are two of the big themes of *Blair Inc.*, a conscientious effort by Francis Beckett, David Hencke and Nick Kochan to uncover the New Labour leader's activities post No. 10: Europe because the authors claim that Blair still longs for a world role, one the European presidency would provide; and money because they say he has made rather a lot of it since 2007.

It was an old American friend who first alerted me to the Blair family's fondness for the folding stuff. After seeing Cherie being interviewed on US TV soon after Tony became Labour leader, she told me: 'My mother had a phrase for people like her - "She'll go grasping into the grave".' Twenty years later, the authors of *Blair Inc.* tell us that the couple now own 36 properties. Their portfolio includes the former Bucks home of Sir John Gielgud that the couple acquired for a reported £4m in 2008 as a sort of personal Chequers. As far as Beckett,

Hencke and Kochan can establish, given the complexity and secrecy that surrounds his affairs, Blair himself is now worth around £60m.

In books and articles written over many years this trio have a good record of illuminating dark places. But despite all their experience and persistence they still found it hard to uncover exactly what the former New Labour prime minister has been up to since he left No. 10 in 2007. With few exceptions, those who have worked or currently work for Blair did not respond to their inquiries. Most of his former colleagues follow the same pattern of *omerta*, former Home Secretary Charles Clarke aggressively so.

The Blairs' financial interests seem to be arranged to defy scrutiny, hidden in part behind the pious façade of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation (TBBF). In its own self-description,

'TBBF is a "think-do" tank, meaning that all of our entire intellectual content is supported by practical delivery on the ground and that all our practical delivery is supported by a robust and intellectually grounded theory of change.'

All clear?

From the golden days when Blair was regarded by many inside and outside Labour as the charismatic shoe-in to follow John Smith as leader, he has become a toxic presence with a legacy his successors still find difficult to live with. His years in charge – control freakery by a small clique with a largely supportive press better describes it – saw falling party membership and morale alongside a wider loss of trust in politicians and the democratic process, all to a background of war and conflict. A Blair premiership many saw founded on hope ended with support for the old Cold War/Neocon gang of the Bushes, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Perle, Greenspan and Wolfowitz. It was during those years that many activists in Scotland left Labour to put their energies into the SNP, with results now self-evident.

Post-1997 the authors trace a dismal pattern of lucrative speechmaking, advisory posts, property acquisition and

endless jetting around the world. Previous prime ministers have made money after No. 10, with Blair's predecessor John Major adding board membership of the sinister Carlyle Group to his well-endowed portfolio. Labour's last PM before Blair, Jim Callaghan, didn't seem short of cash for his Sussex farm and was much involved in the murky affairs of the Bank of Commerce and Credit International, as well as being close to Welsh multimillionaire banker Sir Julian Hodge. Neil Kinnock never made it to No. 10, but he and his wife have not done too badly from their EU earnings, not forgetting their generous tax-funded pension arrangements following retirement from their respective British and European parliaments.

Look to the US where Blair, the authors tell us, has based much of his money earning either directly or through Washington's network of friends and allies, and there's big money for ex-leaders there, too. George W Bush has always had enormous family sources to draw upon from his father's post-White House dealings, and Bill Clinton has reaped huge rewards from speechmaking around the world. And not just former presidents: Henry Kissinger is still making piles as a consultant almost 40 years after leaving the State Department. The authors suggest their subject might even have had Kissinger Associates as the model for his own Tony Blair Associates money-spinning.

The authors tell us that Blair and his fellow New Labour founder Peter (now Lord) Mandelson are not so close these days, each building their multi-million businesses in a way that suggests some rivalry. Where Blair largely depends on the US network he developed as PM, especially in the Middle East, Mandelson looks largely to the Russian and East European oligarchs with Nat Rothschild and Sir Martin Sorrell of WPP being key figures in helping build the wealth that now affords him an £11m home in Regent's Park.

What both seem still to have in common are close relationships with wealthy Zionists, a continuation of the pattern by which Levy and David Sainsbury, both ennobled by Blair, helped the pair launch and sustain New Labour. A big contributor to Blair's Faith Foundation is Haim Saban who the

authors quote as saying: 'I'm a one-issue guy and my issue is Israel. I used to be a leftie but am now very much on the right. The reason for the switch is Israel.'

Little known in the UK, Saban is a powerful TV owner in Germany. He has huge media and other interests in the US where Rupert Murdoch has been a business associate. Saban also funds the part of the Brookings Institution known as the Saban Center for Middle East Policy under former US ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk. Saban donated heavily to George Bush's re-election campaign after the Iraq war and is known to be a strong backer of vocal Israel supporters John McCain and Joe Lieberman. The authors write:

'Tony Blair is publicly signed up to Saban's views about Iran and Israel. If that were not the case, it is most unlikely that Saban would be funding his Faith Foundation.... Money comes with strings attached. Tony Blair would have to be very careful even to appear to criticise the government in Tel Aviv, should he ever wish to do so, if he wants his Faith Foundation to keep receiving Saban's money.'

This mattered for the future of the Middle East – and so for the rest of the world – because one of the many hats Blair had worn since 1997 until his resignation in May 2015 was Quartet Representative (QR). He was found the job, say the authors, by George Bush after the previous QR, John Wolfensohn, concluded that his mandate was inadequate for the scale of the job and because he lacked the support of the Bush administration, especially that of veteran neocon Elliot Abrams in the State Department. (Abrams, it will be remembered, was pardoned by George H W Bush for his role in Iran-Contra.)

Blair accepted that limited mandate and by most accounts put only a fraction of Wolfensohn's time and effort into the job. Rather than engage in the patient, detailed work required to move Israel/Palestine matters forward, the authors suggest that he has been broad brush at best and mixed in his motives between apparently pursuing a peace process and advancing his own commercial interests in the region. The authors say:

'He has irrevocably contaminated the QR job with his other activities. He often takes his personal staff, not QR staff, to meetings, and his personal staff, not QR staff, often speak for him in his role as QR.....Today as QR he is a passenger at best, a liability at worst.'

Blair Inc. describes the work the ex-PM has done for some seedy regimes, often aided by former No 10 staff – Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell, Tim Allan being three of the most prominent. Its authors also also list Blair clients, from Louis Vuitton and Moët Hennessey to JP Morgan, adding in titbits like the £50,000 fee for a speech to the International Sanitary Supply Association.

Such information the authors have assiduously gleaned help form a picture of a figure lost in endless money-making, carefully concealed by lawyers, accountants and draconian terms of employment confidentiality that apply even to interns. Blair jets around the world with a self-regarding sense of mission apparently unaware of – or perhaps simply indifferent to – the toxic tag he carries with him. That reputation derives not just from the Iraq war but for the deceit that induced it and which coloured much of his administration.

The authors open their final chapter, 'A gold-plated prison', with a quote from his former friend, Greg Dyke: 'I think Blair is now a very sad man. Rich, but [he] betrayed everything the Labour Party was about.' I'm not happy in general with this 'betrayal' approach: it is often applied by those who personalise the gap between unreasonable expectations and real life. Blair has some praiseworthy achievements to record in his time as prime minister after a long period when Labour under Foot and Kinnock looked unlikely to enter government at all. What matters more to me is the legacy of those who have exercised great influence. In Blair's case the verdict is not good, as we can see clearly after May 7. Many of Blair's young New Labour praetorian guard are no longer MPs; Scotland is now SNP territory; the Tories have a majority for the first time in nearly 20 years; inequality grows while bankers continue their bad old ways and we remain subservient to Washington and the largely bogus nostrums of

the 'war on terror'.

The secrecy surrounding Blair encountered by the authors has always been part of his story. His leadership campaign after Smith's death was managed by 'Bobby' for fear that his bid would be tainted by association with Mandelson. His early biographers made no mention of his introduction to the Israelis by his law chambers colleague and president of the Board of Deputies Eldred Tabachnik. Nor is it still widely known that the Israeli embassy introduced Blair to Levy, who then opened the till that freed his tennis pal from party obligations.

Much of what happened under the Blair premiership remains under 30-year-rule wraps and we now hear that the Chilcot Inquiry of the Iraq war set up in 2009 will not now report before 2016.

In March this year the London *Evening Standard* reminded us of the sinister dimension that now accompanies this secrecy. Under the headline 'Secret terror trial ends in farce as student is cleared of targeting Blair' it reported: 'Britain's first secret terror trial descended into farce today as a law student caught with the address of Tony Blair's house was cleared of plotting terrorist attacks.' The paper went on:

'Media lawyers are trying to have more details made public of what was said behind closed doors. MPs and pressure groups have condemned secret trials but prosecutors claimed the secrecy was justified in the interests of national security, and described it as "an exceptional case".'

Beckett, Hencke and Kochan have done us a service in trying to pierce the barriers Blair has erected around his life and business since 2007. The cost of that concealment does not just burden British citizens – his personal security guards claim £250,000 a year in expenses alone from the taxpayer, they tell us – the secrecy and the cynicism that it helps generate leaves a noxious legacy to whoever again would claim to lead the country in a more decent direction. Will Labour's next leader be able to assure us that he's 'a pretty straight sort of guy' – and be believed?

Tom Easton