

Broken Vows
Tony Blair
the Tragedy of Power

Tom Bower

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Tony McWalter, a Labour MP and former philosophy lecturer, rose at Prime Minister's Questions on 28 February 2002 and asked the following question:

'Since my Right Honourable friend is sometimes subject to rather unflattering or even malevolent descriptions of his motivations would he provide the House with a brief characterisation of the political philosophy which he espouses and which underlies his policies?'

Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, A.N. Wilson described what followed:

'Mr Blair was, for the moment, uncharacteristically, silenced. Then, he began to waffle in his customary fashion. He spoke of NHS investment plans and the appointment of Sir Magdi Yacoub to head a new scholarship scheme. Most of the sketch-writers who reported the moment saw it as typical of New Labour's desire to "spin". Ask Blairites a direct question, and they will start force-feeding you with propaganda about their glorious achievements in health, transport and good old education.'¹

Wilson's view is very much Bower's. *Broken Vows* tells us that the man once called 'Bambi' was perhaps as empty-headed as the epithet suggests. And of course, wrong-headed, too, about so many things. Bowers writes with regret – the regret of a Labour voter in 1997 who, like so many, was suckered in by the promise of that Bambi freshness. Tony broke Tom's heart. But I am not sure I have learnt what were those broken vows. What exactly was Bower –or indeed any of us – expecting?

The received view of New Labour's rush to the till-death-do-us-part section of those vows has at its core the perpetual

1 *Sunday Telegraph* 3 March 2002

acrimony between Brown and Blair, which paralysed decision-making and split the party, the Parliamentary Labour Party, and the Civil Service. Of course there is ample evidence to support that view – it is incontestable. But Bower identifies other issues: Blair's lack of policy leadership, his absence of a historical perspective (especially in the context of Labour history) and his 'dithering'. Let's look at the historical perspective, since I think it contains one of the dead weights which crush Labour politicians and prevent them from developing a true identity, as opposed to something cooked up along with the late Philip Gould's breakfast.

Bower asserts that Blair had no knowledge of Harold Wilson or Jim Callaghan. He doesn't really explain what exactly he means by this, but I would bet that Blair's understanding of his immediate Labour predecessors in No. 10 was shaped by the myth that their economic record was a shambles; that everything should be seen through the prism of the 'Winter of Discontent'; and that their mismanagement inevitably led to the dawn of Thatcherism and the triumph of individualism over collectivism.

I don't propose here to pore over why I think Labour's 1970s economic record was nowhere near as bad as the NuLab crowd seem to accept. What is evident to me – and this whole process was repeated during the last election – is that the Labour leadership is scared shitless of defending its economic record when compared to that of the Tories. Saying that doesn't make past mistakes any better of course, but it does mean that Labour repeatedly fails to defend or, *more importantly*, does not try to understand the lessons of its record, while always yielding to the Tories' economic tune.

What becomes a political party – a 'democratic socialist' party to boot – when it cannot use words like 'redistribution' openly? Or when it concedes the argument on austerity in order to clothe itself in some highly contested theory, merely to look as tough as the other side? Gordon Brown's reputation as a 'sound chancellor' was, after all, founded on two years of sticking to Tory spending plans after 1997. But as Tony Blair once told the PLP (if memory serves), if we want to beat the

Tories we have to occupy their territory. *That's* the way to win – let's not obsess too much with the past, least of all past failures.

The New Labour years did see many failures, but Bower's somewhat monochromatic history of that period barely allows for any successes. Let's be fair, there were some which get a passing mention – the national minimum wage, some equality legislation, a peace agreement in Northern Ireland – although Bower omits to mention devolution, which now turns out to be a mixed blessing for Labour. One can't read *Broken Vows* and not come to the conclusion that Bower's sources were mainly people who had a bit of an axe to grind, not only against Blair but also, possibly even more worryingly, against each other. All the 180 senior politicians, civil servants and military top brass that Bower claims to have spoken to all attest to one thing: the dysfunctionality of the UK government was at least as much their fault as was the new style 'sofa' administration of T. Blair.

I wonder if this could be the implicit target of *Broken Vows*. If it is, then it hits the nail on the head. The UK is run by a class of individuals who collectively couldn't run a piss-up in a brewery, and no end of cajoling, threats and dismissals (although there weren't enough of those) by a here-today-gone-tomorrow politician is going to make much difference. As for the politicians, having seen so many close-up I can attest that the lure of a ministerial red box can be overwhelming. It confirms their *indispensability*. And, to boot, I often wondered whether those red boxes ever contained any evidence which might actually support the latest policy adventure of its keeper.

I would like to have seen Bower spend more time on New Labour's relationship with the City, especially in the light of the recession. That would be a welcome subject for another book; for one thing that Bower does bring to his trade is an ability to extract unwitting confessions from his witnesses. But one wonders whether the public is ready for another volume on what happened in the Brown/Blair years – a thought prompted by the fact that this one has been on sale at half

price on the high street almost immediately after publication.

What is definitely of current interest is what Blair is up to in his post-Prime Ministerial career as a multimillionaire. Could that tell us more about the man than all his years in office? Could that tell us why we are so cynical about our ruling class, or at least the 'left of centre' part of it? Nobody would bat an eyelid at the thought of a Tory seeking financial aggrandisement – we all know that's what they believe in. But even now it has come as bit of a shock to see Labour grandees falling prey to the lure of bling in quite the same way as Blair, Mandelson *et al.* The old saw that Tory politicians were more likely to fall victim to sex scandals whilst Labour politicians fell victim to financial scandals (each stereotype, of course, reflecting their different supposed deficiencies) seems to be upheld today.

I recall at the 2011 Labour Party conference being upbraided by an irate ex-Chief Whip, Baroness Hilary Armstrong (who succeeded her father into her seat in the Commons), for suggesting in a letter published in *The Guardian* that senior Labour politicians might desist from raking in the cash after their turn at the helm. That followed the news that Baroness Sally Morgan, once of Blair's circle, had sat on the board of a care home business that went bust. What, I wonder, was her contribution? And what, I wonder, did she think her contribution would do to enhance the public's perception that Labour is different from *them* – the Tories? Blair's recent admission that he doesn't understand what's happened to the Labour Party with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader merely reflects his inability to grasp the idea that not only should Labour not ape Tory policies, it should also not ape Tory behaviour.

In Tony-speak (at least according to Bower and there's little contrary evidence) it's a kind of duty to demonstrate that we can all become multimillionaires, even if it means mixing it with the world's dictators. Isn't this just a more sublime enactment of that precious phrase 'equality of opportunity' after all? Blair's ever present get-out clause is to explain that his real motivation is to civilise these people, rather than

develop his bank balance. Pity he didn't try that on Saddam Hussein rather than clinging onto George W. Bush's coat tails. He did try it with Gaddafi but that particular failure of ambition floundered on bad timing when Gaddafi was executed crawling out of a drain.

While *Broken Vows* makes little attempt to consider the positives that may have emerged from Labour's thirteen years in office (and I would cite the albeit flawed Climate Change Act and other climate change initiatives as deserving recognition), I would recommend it as essential reading for any aspiring politician of the left. Bower's detailed chapters on health, education, energy and immigration provide a very useful primer on how *not* to go about things.

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