

This is a chapter in my 2002 *The Rise of New Labour*, which is still available for virtually nothing on-line from Amazon and Abebooks. It originally appeared in *Lobster* 43 and seems worth reposting in the context of the Al Jazeera revelations about Israeli operations in British politics.¹

Blair and Israel

Robin Ramsay

In January 1994, three months before John Smith's death, the then shadow Home Secretary Tony Blair, with wife Cherie Booth, went on a trip to Israel at the Israeli government's expense - a trip, incidentally, neither the Sopel nor Rentoul biographies of Blair mentioned.² Blair had always been sympathetic to Israel, had shared chambers with Board of Deputies of British Jews President Eldred Tabachnik,³ and had joined the Labour Friends of Israel on becoming an MP. Two months after returning from Israel, Tony Blair was introduced to Michael Levy at a dinner party by Gideon Meir, the number two in the Israeli embassy in London.⁴ Levy was a retired businessman who had made his money creating and then selling a successful record company and had become a major fund-raiser for Jewish charities. Levy was 'dazzled by Blair's drive and religious commitment' and the two men became friends.⁵ A month later the leader of the Labour Party, John Smith, died, and Blair won the leadership election contest with Gordon Brown - in some accounts with financial

1 See for example <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/israels-parliamentary-plot-uk-politicians-170107220710691.html>>.

2 See the profile of Michael Levy in the *Daily Express* 26 June 2000.

3 Geoffrey Alderman, 'Playing Tennis with Blair' in *The Jewish Quarterly*, Autumn 1997.

4 Tom Easton tells me that in April, during the Israeli assault on the Palestinians, a Gideon Meir was one of the government spokespeople for the Israeli government.

5 *The Sunday Times* 2 July 2000. For 'dazzled by his drive and religious commitment' I would read 'supported Israel'.

assistance from Levy.⁶ All accounts are agreed that Michael Levy then set about raising money – the figure of £7 million is widely quoted – for the personal use of his new ‘friend’, Tony Blair, leader of the Labour Party. The big early contributors to the ‘blind trust’ which funded Blair’s office were:

‘....a group of businessmen involved in Jewish charities whose decisions to give to Labour have been crucially influenced by the party’s strong pro-Israeli stance under both Tony Blair and his predecessor John Smith.....Levy brought the world of North London Jewish business into the Labour Party.....some of the names whom Levy persuaded to donate include Sir Emmanuel Kaye of Kaye Enterprises, Sir Trevor Chinn of Lex Garages, Maurice Hatter of IMO Precision Control and David Goldman of the Sage software group...it is clear, however, that for this group Blair’s (and Smith’s before him) strong support for Israel is an important factor, especially with those such as Kaye, Chinn and Levy himself, who raise large sums for Israeli causes. Nick Cosgrave, director of Labour Friends of Israel, says Blair “brought back Labour Friends of Israel into the Labour Party, in a sensebefore the majority of supporters of Labour Friends felt uncomfortable with the Labour Party”.’⁷

By 1994 it was clear that, barring a miracle, the Tories would lose the next General Election; Tony Blair was widely recognised as one of Labour’s coming men; and there had already been speculation in the media – notably in *The Sunday Times* – that he would succeed John Smith as Labour leader. It is hard to read this account of the events from Blair’s trip to Israel to the funding of his private office and *not* conclude that the Israeli government had spotted Blair as a very pro-Israeli politician and possible leader of the Labour Party and steered

⁶ In most – e.g. John Rentoul, *Tony Blair*, (London: Little Brown, 1995), p. 390 – the money came from Barry Cox, Peter Mandelson’s erstwhile boss at London Weekend Television (LWT). On the LWT network see Andy Beckett, ‘A world apart’, in *The Guardian* (Weekend), 4 September 1999.

⁷ John Lloyd, *New Statesman*, 27 February 1998.

him towards the leading Jewish fund-raiser in London.⁸

As leader of the party, with the Levy-raised money in his 'blind trust', Blair achieved financial independence from the trade unions and the Labour Party. Blair hated the Labour Party and viewed it as his enemy.⁹ With the Levy money Blair was able to begin expanding his private office and he hired Alastair Campbell, former Political Editor at the *Daily Mirror* as his press officer in September 1994 and diplomat Jonathan Powell as his chief of staff in January 1995. The Labour Party now had a leader over whom it had no control at all.

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Re-reading this after the Al Jazeera revelations, we could add the following quote about Gideon Meir (see note 4 above) from the Jabotinsky Institute of Israel:¹⁰

'Thus Gideon Meir had the privilege of cultivating two statesmen from Great Britain from the ranks of the Labour Party, familiarizing them with the State of Israel and the issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its influence upon the relationship between Israel and the European nations. In time, these two politicians were

⁸ It was reported in the *Sunday Telegraph* 25 July 1999 that Blair tried to make Levy a Minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). This would have been a stunning coup by the Israelis but it was resisted by the Foreign Secretary, at the behest, presumably, of the traditionally pro-Arab FCO. Instead Levy became Blair's personal envoy to the Middle East – to no great effect thus far.

⁹ On Blair's dislike of Labour see Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, (London: Little Brown, 1998), p. 216 where he quotes Blair: 'I will never compromise. I would rather be beaten and leave politics than bend to the party. I am going to take the party on'; and Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'Peter's Friend' in *The Observer* 4 February 2001 where Wheatcroft quotes Blair's friend, the novelist Robert Harris: 'You have to remember that the great passion of Tony's life is his hatred of the Labour Party.'

If he hated the party, why did he join it? One report in an (alas) undated cutting I have, from the *Daily Mail* circa 1997, I think, has a purported barrister friend saying he asked why Blair, no lefty, had joined Labour. Blair replied that he thought he would rise faster in Labour. Ah, the authentic ringing tone of a pure careerist move! On the other hand, the *Daily Mail*? The Forger's Gazette, as Michael Foot called it? Maybe.....

¹⁰ <<http://en.jabotinsky.org/about-us/diplomatic-secrets-from-ambassador-gideon-meir/>>

both to become heads of state: Anthony (Tony) Blair (1997-2007) and Gordon Brown (2007-2010).'

And my caution –

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– was unnecessary. Blair joined Labour Friends of Israel and the Israelis helped to get him elected leader. He might have made it on his own – after four general election defeats the Labour Party was ripe for a televisual, middle class, Thatcherite, young careerist – but the money raised by Levy helped and made him independent of the Party.¹¹

¹¹ If it was indeed raised by Levy and not just laundered through Levy by the Israeli state....