

The great charlatan

My Life, Our Times

Gordon Brown

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There were never any fundamental policy differences between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Both men accepted that the world was completely dominated by the super rich and that government in the modern world had to serve their interests: there was no alternative. Social democratic reformism was abandoned and neo-liberalism was enthusiastically embraced. Instead of rolling back the Thatcherite assault on the working class and the welfare state, they proceeded to consolidate it. This was what New Labour was all about.

Certainly Brown made an original contribution to their partnership. It was he who recognised that the super rich could be persuaded to tolerate government spending on schools and hospitals but only if they were allowed to profit handsomely from it. This was his great contribution to 'Socialist thought'. The collapse of Carillion is, of course, one of Brown's vultures coming home to roost.

Although their most advertised political differences were essentially about who was to be Prime Minister, there was another disagreement. Blair loathed the Labour Party and found it positively demeaning having to mix with and pretend concern for ordinary people, many of whom actually worked for a living and some of whom were even poor. He hoped to liberate the Labour Party from its links with the trade union movement, which he believed had long outlived its usefulness, and to instead make it the party of the liberal super rich. Labour would be turned into a British version of the Clinton-led Democratic Party, funded by the liberal wing of the ruling class.

Brown, however, recognised that even in a neo-liberal world it was still necessary to disguise a Labour government wholly dedicated to the service of big business and the banks as at least having some residual connection with traditional Labour values. After all, what did it cost to occasionally call someone 'comrade' or mention 'socialism'? In this he was merely following in the long hallowed tradition of the Labour Right, throwing crumbs to the Labour Party's members and supporters while handing over whole loaves to the rich and super rich.

This different attitude to the Labour Party has left Brown and his

supporters much better placed to adapt to the rise of Jeremy Corbyn. Whereas Blair finds it hard to disguise the fact that he would like to see the Labour Party destroyed, Brown has actually set about trying to re-invent himself as some sort of lefty. His recent memoir *My Life, Our Times*, is a contribution to the process. He does not repudiate New Labour, arguing instead that it was an attempt to restrain and control neo-liberalism rather than an embrace of it. New Labour's sucking-up to the super rich, according to Brown, was always intended to benefit ordinary people. To put it another way: whereas Blair had embraced Thatcherism in order to help the rich (and to help himself become seriously rich in the process), Brown claims that he embraced it to help the poor. None of which can be taken seriously.

It is worth remembering Brown's positive enthusiasm for the excesses of the financial sector. As late as 20 June 2007, speaking at the Mansion House, he celebrated 'the beginning of a new golden age for the City of London', promised a further roll back of regulation and boasted of how he had resisted pressure for increased regulation 'after Enron and Worldcom'. Even more incredibly, on 26 November 2007, the great charlatan told the Confederation of British Industry that even after Northern Rock, the government was committed to continuing 'our risk based approach to deregulation . . . from the light touch of the Financial Services Authority right across to reducing inspections by local authorities'. He even promised to further reduce the 'health and safety burdens' on business. And after the financial disaster that he had so ably helped make possible actually occurred, on 20 May 2009, Brown once again spoke to the CBI, reaffirming the government's commitment to 'open, free trade and flexible globalisation' and promised that the government was 'ready to sell off very substantial numbers of assets, and have nominated those assets, sometimes controversially, for these sales to take place'. He promised that there were going to be 'very substantial efficiency savings in the public services' – Westminster 'liespeak' for cuts. And he apologised for having had to raise the top rate of tax, something the government had not wanted to do. The record speaks for itself. And let us be absolutely clear: if Brown had won the 2010 general election it would have been New Labour who imposed Austerity.

It is worth noting one particularly outrageous claim that Brown makes in his memoir: if he had been re-elected he intended to replace student fees with a graduate tax. This is what is today called a 'Cleggie', of course. It is starkly contradicted by what his government was actually doing at the time. It had set up the Browne review, headed up by the former head of BP and stuffed with hand-picked stooges, equipped with a McKinsey agenda, to begin the process of privatising British Higher Education. It was not really a review because the outcome was wholly pre-determined. The Browne review spent a derisory

£68,000 on research into reforming the finances of Higher Education. In reality, there was no research because the review was appointed specifically to recommend a drastic increase in fees to £9,000. The intention was that only the top universities would charge the full amount and that the rest of the sector would find itself competing with private providers in a relentless drive to the bottom. Some universities would have been unable to compete so they could have been sold off to private equity funds and the like. This was the intention: to expose Higher Education to the global market. What does Brown have to say? He claims that the proposed increase in fees his government would have introduced would have made a graduate tax more urgent. He was going to dramatically increase fees in order to get rid of them! And politicians wonder why they are not trusted. In fact, the Cameron government dropped the ball by allowing the whole sector to raise fees to the highest level. The assault on Higher Education looks set to be renewed today, spearheaded by the Office for Students.

Clearly any attempt by Brown to lay claim to left-wing credentials is just so much sophistry and will not be taken seriously by anyone familiar with the events of the last twenty years. One problem, of course, is the number of the Labour Party's new members who are completely unaware of the Labour Party's actual history in office; but that is another matter.

Which brings us to Blair's wars. How does Brown deal with British involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, fighting in the service of the American Empire? In his memoir, Brown remembers how on 11 September 2001 he had 'cried at the carnage inflicted on our closest ally'. There is no reason to doubt this claim because Brown was absolutely devoted to the United States and regarded US interests as indistinguishable from those of Britain. As far as New Labour was concerned, Britain had global interests but no longer had the military strength to protect them and was now dependent on the Americans. From this point of view, the so-called 'Special Relationship' was a vital concern of British capitalism and its political servants both Labour and Conservative. This recognition long pre-dated New Labour. The post-war Attlee government had recognised it fifty years earlier, although without any of New Labour's enthusiasm. In the 1980s Brown had been a beneficiary of the US State Department's Foreign Leaders programme (as had Blair). They were 'talent spotted' and invited to the US so they could be inducted into the benefits to be derived from service to the US Empire.

The 9/11 attack was seen by the US government as an opportunity to consolidate American global hegemony. The proof of this proposition is demonstrated quite clearly by the fact that the actual response to the attack, the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, was always a side-show. 9/11

provided an opportunity for the US, in alliance with Israel and Saudi Arabia, to attempt to establish complete domination over the Middle East. First Iraq would be dealt with to be followed by Syria and Iran, without forgetting Hamas and Hizbullah. This was the project that New Labour bought into. The only dispute with the Americans was over how to justify this scheme of unprovoked imperialist aggression. New Labour's position was made particularly difficult by the Stop the War movement, which mobilised the largest anti-war campaign in British history. What has Brown got to say? His response is pathetic. 'We were lied to', he tells his readers. Only after Chilcot in 2010 did he at last realise 'how we were all misled on the existence of WMDs'. It was all the fault of MI6 who 'reported chapter and verse the evidence against Saddam and impressed upon me that it was well-founded'. He was actually told the precise location of the various WMD caches. I wonder how this has gone down with MI6.

The problem with his version of events is that, if Iraq had actually possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction, the United States would never have attacked. The invasion was predicated on the confident knowledge that they did not have WMDs, the Iraqi Army was a ramshackle outfit incapable of putting up a serious fight, and the regime only required a shove for it to topple over. The US failure to make any real effort to find these mythical WMDs is further confirmation – if such were required – that both the US and British governments knew Iraq did not have them. The whole WMD story was a lie, a fabricated pretext for launching an illegal and wholly disastrous war. As for Brown, the reader can decide whether he is lying, or is so naïve and gullible as to defy belief.

One other aspect to the Iraq War that he does not acknowledge is that the whole exercise was a humiliating military fiasco for Britain, culminating in British forces being effectively driven out of Basra. While this was mainly a consequence of the American mishandling of the occupation, it was compounded by the fact that, despite its determination to maintain the 'Special Relationship', New Labour was not prepared to commit the resources necessary for the British forces to have any serious chance of completing their mission successfully. Troop numbers were wholly inadequate. The resulting fiasco has been largely hidden from public view, not least courtesy of the Murdoch press that celebrated the whole sad affair as a glorious victory. But historians are certain to see the Iraq War as marking the point at which Britain ceased to be a serious military power.

Before moving on from the Middle East, it is worth noticing Brown's support for Zionism. This has been the mainstream Labour Party position since even before the Balfour Declaration but it became one of the defining characteristics of New Labour. Brown acknowledges Benjamin Netanyahu as 'an

old friend and colleague' although he does regret that his friend does not really support the fake 'two state' Bantustan-type solution to the 'Palestine problem' that Brown obviously does.

Despite the failure in Iraq, New Labour volunteered the British military for a major role in the occupation of Afghanistan once the Taliban began to revive. With attention focussed on establishing domination over the Middle East, the US effectively abandoned Afghanistan, leaving it to become to all intents and purposes a brutal and corrupt narco-state under President Karzai. In these circumstances the Taliban began to increase in strength and rally support. Once again, British forces were committed in completely inadequate numbers without sufficient equipment. On this occasion, however, the Murdoch press refused to play the role of cheerleader. When Blair resigned to be replaced by Brown, Murdoch was persuaded by his son James and *Sun* editor Rebekah Brooks to shift his support to David Cameron and the Conservatives. Instead of the *Sun* covering up the military situation, it now set about exposing it, even blaming the death of individual soldiers on Brown personally. Brown complains bitterly about this, portraying himself as an innocent victim of the Murdoch press, relentlessly persecuted. Unfortunately this attempt to align himself with Murdoch's enemies is undermined by the years he spent courting the man, indeed competing with Blair for his favour. He made no public objection to Murdoch's malign influence over British politics until it was turned against him. And he is still on good terms with the appalling editor of the *Daily Mail*, Paul Dacre. Unable to personally attend the celebration of Dacre's 25th anniversary as *Daily Mail* editor, Brown sent a video tribute instead.

He does not seriously address the humiliating military failure of British forces in Afghanistan and the further decline of Britain as a military power. Along with the Cameron-led Conservatives after him, Brown saw Britain more as a financial and banking power than a military power. The consequences of this for the 'Special Relationship', such as it is, are likely to prove fatal. The shrinking of the British military means that Britain can no longer be a partner in any meaningful sense in future US military interventions.

On 4 March 2009, Brown was given the honour of addressing the US Congress, one of the proudest moments of his life. Understandably, he does not dwell on the episode in his memoir, such displays of subservience to the US not being politic today. Nevertheless it is worth considering what he had to say because no petty ruler or satrap ever pledged allegiance to a Roman Emperor in more fulsome terms. Washington DC was, he told his audience, looked on by the whole world as 'a shining city on a hill'. He praised Kennedy for putting a man on the moon and Reagan for winning the Cold War. America was truly 'the indispensable nation'. After 9/11 the British people had 'wept for our friends in

the land of the free and the home of the brave', and still today, 'whenever a young American soldier or marine, sailor or airman is killed in conflict anywhere in the world we, the British people, grieve with you. Know that your loss is our loss.' He went on to proclaim that the 'partnership' between Britain and the US is 'indestructible', 'unshakeable', 'unbreakable', and that 'there is no power on earth that can drive us apart'. Powerful stuff, one of the great 'I am not Spartacus' speeches.

Would the Trump phenomenon have threatened to 'drive us apart' if Brown were still in power? The likelihood is that a Brown government would be doing its best to cultivate Trump; that, however distasteful, a state visit would be in the offing and ways of flattering the man would be being investigated. The reason for this is quite simple: it is in the best interests of British capitalism to maintain Britain's client relationship with the United States.

John Newsinger has a new book,
Hope Lies in the Proles: Orwell and the Left (Pluto Press), out in March.