

EDITORIAL

Judging the Politics of our Times

There is a retrospective air in British politics at the moment. It is provoked by Tony Blair's decision to stand down as Labour Leader and Prime Minister. Naturally people are assessing his time in power, the key moments of his government and the content and nature of his legacy. This will no doubt dominate the media until we have a new Prime Minister in place. Then the focus will shift to the new leader and what direction he, or improbably she, will follow.

The discussions about Blair's time in power raise two interesting issues. The first relates to the perspectives we adopt when assessing political reigns. The second asks about the ability we have to make balanced judgments about our political society. We shall explore these two issues in turn.

The story being told of Tony Blair's rule has a tragic quality. Blair was the potentially great leader who failed to live up to his potential. He was the new, exciting, dynamic, young leader who promised a new dawn in British politics. He revolutionized the Labour Party and took it from four successive election defeats to three consecutive victories. No Labour Leader had served two full terms before Blair. The celebrations of the 1997 victory actually coincided with the start of a new day. But then progressively and seemingly inevitably he became immersed in more and more suspect practices. There was too much spin and not enough real substance in government policy. In the first two years the Labour government stuck to Conservative spending plans and so was forced to make welfare cuts. When new investment was provided it was announced more than once, making it seem that it was more than it actually was. When this was discovered, the accusation of excessive spin stuck. There was a suspicion that rich party donors were getting special favours from the government. The Ecclestone affair crystallized the sense that all was not quite proper. The resignations of Peter Mandelson reinforced the concern. The police investigations into the alleged selling of peerages have only confirmed this early impression. There were of course some early triumphs. The passing of control of interest rates to the Bank of England was an

unexpected economic coup. The reform of the House of Lords promised much in the early days as did the creation of devolved government in Scotland and Wales. The Good Friday Agreement appeared to open the way for a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. But, despite the landslide second election victory, there was a sense that Blair could not live up to his promise. He was being asked questions about whether he still had the 'trust' of the British people.

Then came September 11th 2001 and the attacks in New York and Washington. This of course led to the war in Iraq and the bursting of any Blair bubble of popular support that might have remained. As the war has continued so Blair has looked more and more like just any other politician. Not to be trusted, self-interested, determined to get his own way and persistently ignoring the wishes of the British people. A million could march against the war in Iraq but still the troops would be sent in. The United Nations failed to pass the vital second resolution but this had no impact on the march to war. What all this amounts to is a powerful narrative of the lost hero who failed to fulfil his potential. The new broom who, rather than sweep the political room clean, ends up covered in the same old dirt.

And this impression of lost potential influences the way in which the story of Blair's rule is being told today. The story is focused on the end point of a war in Iraq. It is a war which no longer commands majority support and is regarded by most as an ongoing disaster. What this means is that any positive achievements are described in a type of 'yes but...' tone. This policy or that initiative might have been good but actually the heart and substance of Blair's story is the ending, a war that cannot be won. Increased spending on schools or hospitals is the side order to the main business of Blair's decision to support Bush.

That Blair's story is being told in this way is probably a good thing. When a nation is at war then that war must define how political events are analysed. Until we know how the war in Iraq finishes then we shall not know the final story of Blair's time as Prime Minister. The judgments we make now, from this current situation, must be provisional. They differ from the judgments made before the war and they will differ from those made in ten years or fifty years. This is not to say Blair will get more favourable reviews later. They may be far worse if the war escalates even further or spreads to other parts of the Middle East. The point is that the story is not over and so we cannot make good judgments about Blair's time as Prime Minister.

This question of how Blair's legacy is assessed generates a larger question about how we make political judgments. The provisional nature of the contemporary political scene means the story never ends. The diffi-

culty this produces is then how to make a positive assessment of a political movement when the world is not an ideal place. Any attempt to be positive seems naive or neglectful of those who have not benefited from the particular set of policies which might well be generally good. In relation to Blair it is manifest in the field of the economy.

There has been under Blair's leadership a long period of economic growth. Gordon Brown is usually credited with engineering this ongoing prosperity and this is almost certainly fair. But Blair deserves some of the credit in that Brown is his Chancellor. But it is by no means a perfect picture. Unemployment is low and in a number of ways the poverty of children has been targeted. But there is still unemployment, a lot of it long term, and there is severe and depressing poverty, a lot of which impacts on children. Perhaps of more concern the benefits of the economic growth are focused on the relatively wealthy in the UK. It is not those who are poorest in Africa, Asia or Latin America who have enjoyed the UK's wealth. They have enjoyed a bit of it because of global policies to reduce debt. But any reasonable analysis of the global situation must conclude there is nothing to celebrate.

What this means is that there is an entrenched situation which makes any celebration of achievement seem impossible. As with the war in Iraq the contemporary context means the story is unfinished. What looms ahead is an unknown ending. Poverty exists in the UK and worldwide and this acts as a check and judgment on UK economic success. The question is whether the existence of a crisis, in this case poverty, means we can never make anything other than a negative judgment about our situation.

Theologically the approach has been to stress that negative judgments must be made. No political movement or ideology can be equated with the Reign of God. Prophecy is about stirring the complacent by highlighting the ongoing situations of injustice. In much political theology a litany of statistics and injustices is frequently recited in advance of political condemnation. At one level this is right and proper. The Church, and thereby its theologians, can too easily be dragooned into supporting the status quo and propping up political orders. But it also carries with it a danger. The danger is that the overall good is lost because the faults are highlighted. The baby goes flying out with the bath water.

This is exemplified by the question of how we theologically and ethically assess Western liberal democratic society. There have been many achievements in the West as a consequence of liberal ideas. Women have a status and position in society hardly envisaged 200 years ago or even at the beginning of the last century. Pluralism and tolerance of difference are public virtues which are relatively unchallenged in the mainstream. Economic growth and prosperity have advantaged many people. This is

not to say there is not gross racism, sexism and poverty. But there is less today than there was and the reasonable expectation is that the situation is getting better. There are threats to democracy, from big business and the media. But there are places of resistance, not least of which is the Internet. In other words there is much to celebrate about Western liberal democracy. But to say this is to seem socially and politically oppressive of those who do not benefit from living in the West. Or to be wilfully cruel to poor people throughout the world.

What this means is that we need to find a theology and a language that can make relative assessments as part of the telling of an unfinished story. One of these relative assessments might be that the political order, liberalism, or the political movement, Blair, are essentially flawed and have failed. Some will argue this point. Another will be that there is only good that has come from them. But these seem rhetorical positions which fail to be accurate. The more likely position is that we have a responsibility to protect continually those things we want to preserve whilst recognizing that there are also some ongoing serious problems. And it will be when we are at our most critical that we need to work hardest at ensuring it is clear what we want to celebrate.

How does this apply to Blair? I suspect it means that a proper assessment of Blair will recognize that the Iraq war is only one part of the story. It is not a part with a relative size, bigger or smaller than what has happened in Northern Ireland, with the economy or in relation to spending on the welfare state. It runs in parallel with these other aspects of his time in power, sometimes dominant and sometimes less so. But it cannot be an ending which controls the rest of the account. In many areas Blair is no tragic figure. But then neither is he the knight in shining armour people hoped for when he first took office.

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