

EDITORIAL

The Virtuous Political Life

There is political change happening all around us. And more interestingly there is the promise of great political change ahead of us. The political change that is occurring now is the end of the Blair/Bush era. Blair has left office. He has been replaced by someone who is both a close associate, in terms of political values and ideals if not personally, and who is determined to demonstrate that he is not the same. Gordon Brown wants to put some distance between himself and the Blair who went to war in Iraq and ended up so unpopular. Brown needs to raise his and the Labour Party's standing in the polls. Meanwhile President Bush is coming rapidly to the end of his time in office. Some argue that his political life, that is, his effectiveness on Capitol Hill, ended a long time ago. Either way these are certainly the final days of his administration. For Democrats at last the President who should never have been, the one who stole the 2000 General Election, is leaving office. One is reminded of the final series of *The West Wing* when the outgoing President and his team sought to govern whilst all around them focused on the campaigns for the nominations. The only time the *West Wing* Presidency seemed real was when the President and his staff watched the results on TV, like everyone else. Similarly what matters now in Washington is the future, the next President, not the current incumbent.

The new era, whatever it will be, is being inaugurated by the rhetoric of change. The Bush/Blair era is being condemned by its immediate successors through their eager desire to prove themselves different. This is not unusual as politicians rarely leave office on a high. So perhaps predictably our politicians seem to believe—and presumably it is what their focus groups are telling them—that people want change. The idea of change is of course the centre piece of Obama's campaign. He is the young, new Senator who will become the young new President. He is determined to change the Washington landscape. Out with the old-style politics and in with the new. A politics that people can believe in again. A politics that is not cynical, not tarnished with the aroma of corruption and sleaze, not mired in media manipulation and personal self-interest. Obama is committed to his ideals and principles and he wants things to be different, to

change. He, like George W. and the first Clinton (Bill), is positioned as the outsider ready to topple the establishment elite. It is a powerful message in a country which does not trust its government and positively condemns governmental insiders—despite Aaron Sorkin's notable efforts with *The West Wing*.

Obama's campaign is very similar to that currently being waged by David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party in the UK. Cameron is young and new. He promises an end to old-style politics. He rides his bike to work, worries about his carbon footprint, and does not look blank when asked what's on his current play-list. It is reported that he seeks to be the Conservative's "Tony Blair," presumably to Gordon Brown's John Major. Cameron is a product of the English establishment, Eton and Oxford, but he seeks to bury this in images of the hands-on Dad juggling bottles, bed-time and washing up. He may not be long on detailed policy commitments, he may well think one of Blair's electoral triumphs was that he also was not long on policy, but he promises to be new and different—to introduce the change that the British people want. And if he is right and change is wanted then he could well be successful.

If Obama and Cameron are the shiny new candidates promising change then the old guard is represented by Clinton and Brown. Neither of these two can credibly claim to be new. This seems doubly ironic since, if she were successful, Clinton would be the first woman President. A major innovation one would imagine. But Clinton is associated with her husband. And the problem for her, as it was for Al Gore, is judging whether that association is electorally good or bad. Added to this Clinton is not a first-term Senator and crucially she has taken a position on the Iraq war. Clinton's strategy for the campaign seems to be to make this lack of newness a positive. She is experienced. She has the ability to deliver. This being code for the fact that she, unlike Obama, knows how the corridors of power work. She has walked them successfully, she understands their intricacies, she can pull the levers of power. Obama will waste his first term, perhaps like Clinton the First did, trying to find out how to get his new style of politics accepted, or implemented. This could be a very believable message. If Americans are suspicious of the government establishment, and its ability to protect its own interests, then they may well feel that Obama is too naive to tackle such a big, bad beast. And if Clinton can combine being experienced, able to deliver, with being new, that is being the first woman, then this may be a highly potent mix. But it is a tricky balancing act and many Americans prefer their candidate to appear to be an outsider.

Gordon Brown is making less of his experience in the corridors of Westminster. There are mentions of his record as Chancellor of the

Exchequer. In recent weeks, as Brown has been faced with a series of unforeseen disasters, these have increased. When Britain was confronted with unprecedented flooding and the threat of disease in farm animals, Brown was portrayed as the experienced leader standing firm and steady, not panicking. Or at least not panicking in public. But this has not been central to his message. Rather he has presented himself as the agent of change. He has talked about the need for the Labour Party to change. In fact in his acceptance speech as leader of the Labour Party he described Labour's history as being a history of a party willing to introduce much needed change. The great moments of Labour history, the victory in 1945 and the foundation of the Welfare State, and the stunning victory of 1997, were achieved because Labour was recognized as a party of change. Brown argued that his role was to re-establish this aspect of the Labour Party's identity. Brown stated that he had, during his leadership campaign, toured Britain and he was aware that people wanted a change in politics. They wanted something different. Presumably in part this meant they didn't want any more Blair. But one can imagine that many people also saw Westminster politics as irrelevant and ineffective. Increasing voter apathy is a sign that people don't think politics actually makes a difference, or at least voting for one of the main parties doesn't make a difference. So Brown promised to make Labour the party that would deliver change. A new style of politics. He spoke of the age of change and of the party of change. This has been emphasized to such an extent that it is the focus of the satirical magazine *Private Eye*'s attacks on Brown. What this means is that Brown's rhetoric is remarkably similar to Cameron's and to Obama's. Brown's problem is the extent to which he is perceived as new, or at least distant from the last regime under Blair. For these purposes his well-known falling out with and hostility towards Blair will serve him well. What will be interesting is whether it is enough to hold off the challenge of the clearly newer Cameron.

The rhetoric of a promise of change is in one sense a very healthy sign. Political life needs to be refreshed by those hoping to implement ideals and principles whilst resisting the corrupting allures of power. A politics without the idealistic can easily become a diminished managerialism. But there is a danger that the call for a new style of politics is but itself a sign of a tired cynicism. The politics which says a plague on all your houses is a politics which has become deeply disillusioned and dismissive. It can easily be an idealism underpinned by nihilism. It fails to recognize that many good people, at some cost to themselves, will try to serve a public for the betterment of that public and not themselves. Politicians do not all have their noses in the trough. In fact most of them work hard because they are committed to helping the poorest or the weakest. And in this

many are inspired by their faith. Alongside this there is a need to recognize that public institutions are structured as they are so that corruption is limited and good laws can be implemented fairly. Again this does not mean institutional change should not sometimes occur. But the baby must not go flying out with the bath water. When political revolutions have smashed existing structures and institutions oppression has usually followed closely behind.

Of course neither Brown, Obama or Cameron are advocating revolution. They want change. The danger is that in the rush to be seen as agents of change something of the skills and excellences of political life are lost. This is not to advocate Clinton's cause. It is more to ask a MacIntyre type question of political life. What is the established virtue/skill of politics? What constitutes its excellence? How does one become the political apprentice and how and when is that recognized? This is not to say any of the politicians discussed above lack the necessary virtues/skills of politics, nor that they have not served their apprenticeship. The desire to describe themselves as new and bringing about change is a demonstration of the very insider old-style politics they disavow. The problem is that it does politics and politicians no favours to hide this skill. Nor does politics win when politicians reject the discipline which has formed them. The rhetoric of change suggests we need a new discipline of politics. This is unlikely—and it will not serve the public good. What we need is a refreshing, overt celebration and investigation of the arts of the skilled, virtuous political life. This is more of a challenge than any promise to introduce change.

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