

Comment Debate



Irwin Stelzer

The prime minister's detractors and rivals focus on trivia rather than facing him on the battlefield of ideas

Keeping Blair the bold revolutionary is in this country's best interests

Consensus is the enemy of thought. Faced with the need to assure the demise of tens of thousands of trees by filling the pages of newspapers, and the need to fill hours of time that television broadcasters allot to what is called "news", what safer course than to play "I can say what you said, but better?"

So we are treated to a profusion of stories about the decline of the prime minister's authority, about the way in which his desperation to secure his "legacy" is causing him to take positions that alienate this or that group in his own party, about how his alienation from his party is likely to drive him into an earlier than planned retirement.

Really? And, if so, so what?

To classify as "news" the fact that many in the Labour party are out of tune with their reform-minded leader is to forget all of the stories that have been written making that point for the past eight years. It has always been the case that the likes of the appalling Glenda Jackson and the principled Peter Kilfoyle dislike all aspects of Tony Blair's foreign and domestic policies. And that the vast middle of the Labour party is far to the left of the Blairites on the political spectrum. Not for them the injection of market mechanisms to reduce the lethal NHS waiting lists, or the incidence of illiteracy and innumeracy among the nation's children. Not for them the release of millions of Iraqis from a death-dealing dictator whose tally of murders far exceeds even the horrendous death tolls now being inflicted on Iraqis by terrorists.

So it is hardly news that Blair's insistence on doing all of the things that his left has always opposed has moved them from sullen disgruntlement to active opposition. After all, their meal ticket, their route to power, intends to abandon them to the uncertain electoral fate awaiting them in the post-Blair era.

Nor is it news that Gordon Brown does not choose to spend his idle hours – if such there be – in the company of the prime minister. Or that, like Eliot's Macavity, Brown is simply not there whenever some political misfortune befalls his boss (not quite the right word), although there are those who say they see traces of his presence whenever the balls take a bad bounce against the PM. This absence of the allegedly prudent chancellor from the scene was most notable when the government caved in to the trade unions and granted public sector workers a continued right to retire on generous pensions at the ripe young age of 60.

Finally, it is not news that the Tory opposition is unprincipled. This is, after all, the party that calls for self-reliance and individual responsibility, and opposed top up fees for students who will use their university degrees to

increase their lifetime earning power. And it is the party that would rather embarrass Blair than grant the security services the length of time they say they need to prepare their cases against potential terrorists by completing the necessary but time-consuming interrogations and DNA and computer analyses.

Nothing here that can reasonably be called "news". But it is all treated as brand new, supporting the conclusion that we are watching something that is also new – the disintegration of the Blair premiership. If the recent media feeding frenzy were merely old wine in new bottles, no harm done. But to use these un-new facts to support a consensus that Blair is finished is to mislead the readers and viewers who rely on the media for news and interpretation. It seems to me more reasonable to argue that we have reached the bottom of the Blair bear market.

He did indeed look foolish for bringing David Blunkett back to the cabinet with unseemly haste, and for defending his serial disregard of the rules. But the result was the replacement of a minister opposing Blair's plans to force malingers

off the disability rolls and into the workplace with one committed to do just that. In other words, a supposedly weakened prime minister, in the week in which the pundits were proclaiming the end of his authority, strengthened his control of a key ministry, and his ability to shape welfare and pension policy.

As for the terrorism bill, can there be any doubt that, even though the House of Commons was only willing to go along with a 28-day detention period for those who might be plotting to blow hundreds of British citizens to smithereens, Blair has won his main point – that the rules must be changed to cope with the new threats facing the nation?

Which raises the really important question, one studiously avoided by the builders of the Blair-is-finished consensus: is it in the nation's interest that he prevail over the combined forces of the Labour left, the Tory opportunists and the Lib Dem grow-the-state-but-not-if-it-increases-national-security crowd?

Sure, it was never going to be easy to get the Labour party to allow parents to choose the schools best suited to their children; or to agree to top-up fees to

help Britain's universities remain among the world's finest; or to agree that the NHS exists to serve patients, rather than the unions, and that patients should be allowed to choose their own hospitals.

Instead of pretending that all of that is news, we should ask the question that Blair asks when he is at his best: "Are these the right things to do for Britain?" Critics complain that the PM's imperious tendencies make it impossible for him to compromise – that is, when they are not complaining that he folds at the first sign of opposition.

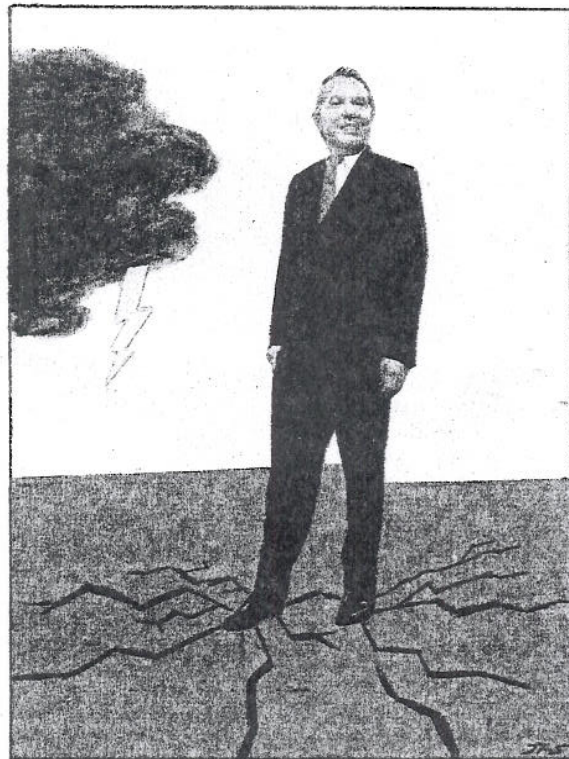
Such objections to his tactics detract from concentration on the substance of the PM's proposals, which mark as profound a revolution as Margaret Thatcher's decision to privatise large swaths of the economy.

Blair is attempting to engineer a massive shift of power from trade unions to consumers, to restore to individuals greater power to control large portions of their own lives. Rather than meet Blair on the battlefield of ideas, those who prefer to leave control of citizens' lives in the hands of the state bureaucracy and the trade unions prefer to talk about tactics, personality, aloofness and other trivia.

Blair likes to think that he is best when he is boldest. But that is a rather superficial self appraisal. Blair is best when he is boldest, true, but he is boldest when he is unconflicted – when he is sure of his moral ground. He knows that the unseating of Saddam was the "right thing" and so is willing to pay a heavy political price. He is less certain what the "right thing" is when it comes to smoking bans: he feels obliged to impose a total ban to improve health, but has a lingering respect for the right of individuals to do what they will so long as they don't harm others. And he stumbles when it comes to crime, an issue on which he can't decide whether to blame the causes of crime or the criminal, or to aim at rehabilitation, or punishment. So in those instances he lurches from policy to policy.

But he knows that it is the "right thing" to attempt to reverse the decline in civility; to transfer power to the users of public services so that the young can be educated, the sick cured, and faith in public provision restored; to move against terrorists, no matter the squeamishness of a judiciary unable to adjust to 21st-century warfare; and to stay the course in Iraq. He put it best in the debate on the terrorism bill: "Sometimes it is better to lose and do the right thing than to win and do the wrong thing." If that be stubbornness, with a high political price, my guess is he's willing to pay it.

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