

Amid all the plots and letter campaigns, Brown quietly plans his future

Anyone who knows Gordon Brown will know that his disappearance from the public scene this summer had multiple reasons. Foremost was his desire to dote on his new son, which he did with his characteristic energy and passion. Add to this new doting the continued doting on son John, and you have what for ordinary mortals would be a full summer's activity.

But there was more. The Chancellor always uses the summer to rebuild his intellectual capital. There aren't many politicians who would trade weeks of lolling on the beach for days with biographies of Andrew Carnegie, a reading of Gertrude Himmelfarb's comparison of the British (Brown prefers Scottish) Enlightenment with the bloodier French version, and a tenth (or is it 20th?) rereading of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. But Brown is one such.

A third reason for the summer hibernation was less grand: Brown's Macavity ploy. Out of sight, out of mind. Let Tony Blair take the heat for the chaos in Iraq. Let David Cameron stumble into an embrace with the hoodie lobby. Let John Prescott be saddled with his cowboy boots. And let John Reid enrage crime-ridden Britons with a plan for the early release of criminals to ease the prison crowding brought on by you-know-who's refusal to fund the construction of new housing for unwilling guests of Her Majesty. Better to frolic with John, cuddle Fraser, and curl up with a good book — and return to the fray emotionally relaxed, physically rested, and with his intellectual batteries recharged.

But even on top form, now that he's back, Brown faces some very hard choices. The famous baseball player and armchair philosopher Yogi Berra once said, 'When you come to a fork in the road, take it.' That might have worked for a Yankee catcher, but it won't work for a Chancellor whose principal claim on No. 10 is that he has a clear vision of the path down which he wants to take Britain — what friends call Gordon's 2020 vision. Politics is about choices, and the Iron Chancellor, he of the burgeoning deficits, soaring public spending and bloated public sector, will have to make the toughest of all — between his heart and his head.

In No. 10, his heart and history will call him to take the road headed for tax increases and an expanded state. They will whisper

to him that already-well-off pensioners do not require the state's help in their declining years, and that he should devote available resources to the poorer elderly by means-testing every benefit within his gift. They will urge him to convert the rich into involuntary versions of his hero, Andrew Carnegie, who off his own bat devoted his fortune to public purposes. In short, the prong of the fork marked high taxes, redistribution, means-testing and a bigger, more controlling state will tug at his heartstrings. And that tug will be made all the stronger by the sense of moral purpose that is an important consequence of his upbringing and history.

The other prong will beckon him in the opposite direction, and appeal to his head. The famously cerebral Chancellor knows that America's increasing lead over Europe in the productivity race is due to the low taxes that encourage hard work and risk-taking. He knows, too, that his elaborate means-tested benefits discourage savings, and that his various programmes to urge young people into work have not yielded benefits in line with their costs.

The empirically minded Chancellor almost certainly knows, too, that the nation has not received value for the money poured into the health service. His heart will tell him to come up with still more Stalin-style targets, and his personal history will incline him to preserve the role of the state as the sole provider of health-care services.

But key members of his entourage have told him how the NHS staff plays the system — how, for instance, they avoid overrunning targets for waiting times in the emergency rooms by leaving patients in ambulances and setting up 'observation rooms' in which to store patients until they are allowed to start the time tolling by entering the ER.

His heart will tell him to develop still more targets, to make certain that 'the rich' cannot buy their way out of the system by taking their ailments and their NHS money to the private sector. His head will tell Brown — the man so convinced of the virtues of competition that he pushed through legislation criminalising anti-competitive behaviour by private-sector companies — that only patient choice and competition can produce health care of sufficient quality to satisfy the increasingly savvy British public.

So, too, with education. Brown's heart will beat more quickly and happily if he takes

the road that leads to a system like that of his native Scotland in the days when Adam Smith was penning his masterpieces. The son of the laird and the son of the chimney sweep sat in the same classrooms of Scotland's phenomenally effective schools — an egalitarian's dream come true. Brown's head will tell him that those days are gone for ever, if indeed they ever existed. After all, a man who has studied *The Wealth of Nations* must have noticed that Adam Smith favours fees, paid by pupils directly to their teachers, so that instructors will be dependent on 'the affection, gratitude and favourable report' of students, and prompted to be diligent in the discharge of their duties. Such competition for students — the money follows the student, to use current jargon — would avoid the situation prevailing in universities like Oxford, where 'the greater part of the publick professors have, for these many years, given up altogether even the pretence of teaching'.

Brown knows that only competition for good schools can force poor schools to improve. Which means parental choice. He knows that his pledge to bring state spending on education to the same per-pupil level as the fee-charging schools is unaffordable, and that even if it were, pouring money into the present, unreformed system — as he did with the NHS — would be a feckless enterprise.

So when the Chancellor comes to the fork in the road, he can't follow Yogi Berra, and just take it. He will have to choose. He will have to shed his own history, and tell his heart that he will deliver what it demands, but by methods dictated by his head, and probably uncongenial to his heart. But this is a man whose head led him to resist the pressure of his own Prime Minister and Europe's finance ministers to enter euroland, to grant the Bank of England quasi-independence, and to take on the City establishment by making the crime of price-fixing a ticket to jail. If he follows his head rather than his heart, he should present the voters with a reasonable alternative to his hoodie-loving, chocolate- and Thatcher-hating, Israel-bashing opponent.

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Fraser Nelson is away.