

Comment

Blair should stand firm in the face of Brownite fire

Those who want to push him to quit now must be prepared for the kind of policies that have crippled other European nations

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Anyone who thinks that it is in Britain's interest for Tony Blair to give up the sturm and drang of No 10 - and now - for the infinitely more attractive life of trousering big bucks by regaling adoring American audiences, should think again. And if the prime minister is entertaining any such thoughts, he should do what the University of Chicago's one-time chancellor Robert Maynard Hutchins claimed he did whenever he felt like exercising: "Lie down until that feeling goes away."

Blair promised voters that he would serve out a full term. I know it is unfashionable for politicians to keep their promises, and it is certainly arguable that the prime minister has not been able to keep all of his, but he has fought to keep the most important promises - to wage a war on terror and to reform the education and healthcare systems. His victories are far from trivial. It would be a pity to go from being a profile of courage to becoming a profile of pusillanimity in the face of Brownite fire.

More important, the nation now knows what it faces when Gordon Brown moves from No 11 to No 10. The chancellor's latest budget statement contained the road map to a Brown Britain. If there is a budget surplus, it will be spent by the chancellor rather than returned to the taxpayers. If the current taxpayers cannot be persuaded to hand over enough money to meet the chancellor's needs, he will borrow in the confident knowledge that it is the taxpayers, not he, who will have to honour the billions in IOUs. If there is any conceivable excuse to expand the reach of government, whether it be a hubristic forecast of the needs of the labour market a decade hence, or that favourite child of all believers in big, centralised government - athletics - he will take it. The message to the aspiring middle class is: be afraid, be very afraid that you have only seen the beginning of Brown's programme of extorting funds from the middle classes to pay for the myriad social programmes that his fecund brain so effortlessly produces.

The Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee wants Blair to go now lest "he stamp his imprint" on the comprehensive spending review, in which case, she worries, Brown's next great spending spree, on education, "just won't happen". Given the inability of the last such spree, on the NHS, to produce benefits at all proportional to the costs, that might not be a bad thing. Those who are so eager to see the back of Blair might ask themselves if his anointed successor is likely to allow the hospitals that have squandered the millions lavished on them to fail, freeing up resources for the better-run institutions. If the answer is no, Blair should stick around until the healthcare reforms he has promised since the spending spigots were turned on are further along.

Extending the time in which the chancellor impatiently waits his turn at the helm will increase three possibilities that might enable England to avoid the fate of Brown's socialist Scotland. First, it just might give the chancellor time to reconsider some of his policies, as he now seems to be doing in the case of means-testing pensions. Second, if the economy's softening turns into a recession, a challenger to succeed Brown might emerge from the ranks of New Labour. Not likely, but increasingly possible the longer the Blairs delay moving to Connaught Square. Then

the Labour party would have a choice between Brown and a candidate less offended by the lifestyle of middle England.

Third, David Cameron clearly needs time to mature. He has numerous task forces working to add appealing policies to an apparently appealing persona. He needs time to sort out their recommendations. He needs time, too, to experience the cut and thrust of frontline parliamentary debate, and to hone his skills as a party manager.

It is not, of course, Blair's job to hang on so that he can bolster the leader of the opposition - although one wonders to whom he would really prefer to turn over the keys to No 10. But the longer he holds to his promise, the shorter the tenure of a Brown government before it will have to face the voters, and test the chancellor's theory that the electorate is eager to endorse a tax-and-spend programme of the sort that has pushed Germany into almost permanent recession and France to the brink of anarchy. Such a trial-by-electorate can only be a good thing for Britain.

Blair has an obligation to see through his commitment to help bring the Iraq war to a conclusion that is a plus for the Iraqi people and for western democracies. It is not necessary to agree with his decision to intervene at the side of America. It is even reasonable for those who believe he concocted a "dodgy dossier" to gain parliamentary approval to go to war to be angry, very angry, but it is not reasonable to hope for a victory for the terrorists, a triumph that might revive latent US isolationism with all of the negative consequences for the western world that the prime minister laid out in his recent speech in Australia.

So those who wish for the end of the quite amazing Blair era should reflect on what a post-Blair Britain will look like if he bows to their wishes and beats a premature departure from public life.

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