

Britain really does need a debate this conference season. Shame it won't get one

Leaders of failed coups either have to get out of town or abase themselves before their still-reigning targets. Gordon Brown, who feels his future career opportunities are greater in Britain than anywhere else, chose the latter course, trundling from television studio to television studio to profess his admiration for his long-time friend, Tony Blair.

Blair's profession of surprise at the coup is just about as genuine as Brown's professions of loyalty. He did, after all, play the matador, waving a red cape in front of the Brown bull by refusing, in his interview with the *Times*, to give a date for his retirement from the ring. Predictably, the impatient bull, already pricked by outriding picadors, charged — on to the waiting blade of the matador. But not before fatally goring his tormentor. Thus was the mutual suicide pact between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown consummated. Blair has to depart at a time and under circumstances not of his choosing. Brown, meanwhile, has reduced the probability of the orderly transition (aka, coronation) he desperately desires by ignoring Evita's advice to Juan Peron — All we have to do is wait, and the country is ours.

This MAD — mutually assured destruction — has all but eliminated the possibility of a serious debate about the future of Britain any time soon. The chief beneficiary of this fiasco is David Cameron and his 'policy-light' — the phrase assigns more weight to his positions than they really deserve. He can now avoid serious policy battles, waiting until his focus groups tell him what he thinks, while Brown concentrates on repairing the damage he has done to himself, and that the enraged Blairites will continue to inflict on him.

All of this when Britain needs a careful rethink of just where it is going. The nation has succeeded in recent years by its distinctiveness in the EU: no euro, no stifling growth-and-stability pact to keep the deficit below 3 per cent of GDP, fewer restrictions on labour market and capital market flexibility, relatively free trade.

Thank Gordon Brown for many of those policies, and the resultant success of the UK economy. But blame him for taking Britain to the brink of Europe's high-tax abyss. While other nations have found that lower taxes stimulate growth and can, if properly crafted, increase Treasury revenues, Brown has steadily ratcheted taxes up to European lev-

els. The government now claims an EU-sized slice of Britain's economic pie. Surely Britain would profit from a debate over whether it favours Brown's apeing of Chirac's riot-prone France, or Merkel's decision to jack up taxes just in time to throttle Germany's recovery? No such luck, with Cameron saying — or worse still, *believing* — that tax cuts are the enemy of economic stability.

Britain also needs to have a serious discussion about the battles it is losing to the Brussels eurocracy. Its businesses now have to implement work rules that, among other things, require 20 minutes of rest every six hours. That sounds reasonable — until one realises that enforcement will require hordes of snoop regulators to respond to the complaints of workers with some petty grievance against their employers.

Capital markets are not to escape the Brussels net. Just when the City is successfully wooing business away from Wall Street, Europe's regulators are swamping British companies and their regulators with rules that threaten to reduce it to a highly regulated, second-class capital market. Surely Britain would benefit if Ed Balls, economic secretary to the Treasury, would spend less time as Brown's spear-carrier in battles with the likes of failed politicians like Alan Milburn and Stephen Byers, and more time leading a debate on how to thwart the EU's effort to bring London's vibrant financial sector down to the level of Frankfurt's; or America's effort to introduce excessive regulation?

Britain is also at a turning point in the history of its welfare state. The Brownites' coup attempt accelerated the inevitable oozing away of Tony Blair's authority, and with it his ability to carry forward reforms to convert the nation's health care and education systems from supplier-driven dinosaurs into modern, consumer-driven service organisations. That chore will now be left to Brown and later, perhaps, to Cameron. But Brown is the man who decided to pour millions into an unreformed healthcare system, and remains the darling of the union bosses who barracked Blair at the TUC conference. And the Tories are taking their lead from policy chief Oliver Letwin, who has pledged a relentless expansion of the state, while his boss rejects the patient passports and school vouchers that would pass control of the public services from the public sector unions to consumers.

Then there is Britain's tax system, an unwieldy creature in need of major simplifi-

cation, and of a sharp tilt away from taxing jobs, wages and profits towards taxing pollution. At least here there is a gleam of hope: George Osborne favours both simplification and a transfer of the tax burden from good things like jobs to bad things like carbon emissions. Whether ideas of such merit will survive the Letwin machine we won't know until Cameron convenes the next focus group. But its chances of survival would be greater if there were a national debate about tax policy, rather than one on the value of the psychiatric diagnoses of a failed home secretary.

Which brings us to Britain's immigration and crime policies, if the current programmes can be dignified with such a description. Britain needs to decide how to balance its need for young, hard-working immigrants against the costs they impose on the communities in which they congregate, and how much of its multicultural policy it is willing to sacrifice to make assimilation and Britishness a priority.

As for crime, the nation faces a choice between a Chancellor who forces the early release of dangerous thugs by refusing to pay for the building of new prisons, and a Tory leader absorbed with the social plight of hoodies. There will be no debate to determine whether the nation wants to do a Giuliani: clear the streets of felons, and the police forces of officers who prefer desk jobs to the mean streets; make parole boards responsible for those they turn loose on the streets; and devote scarce police resources to sending officers into discos, hoping to feel the collar of someone guilty of a homophobic remark.

Any hope of a serious debate of these issues is now dashed. Labour is absorbed in a civil war that will force its cerebral Chancellor to spend time with Andrew Marr rather than, more productively, with Balls and his books. The Tories flee the room when the word 'policy' is mentioned, unless their leader sees an opportunity to attack Israel, or America, or Bush, or neoconservatives, which he tastefully chose to do on 11 September. (Michael Gove, where are you now that we need you?) Meanwhile, debate about the policies Britain needs must wait for calmer or, worse, more troubled times. Pity.

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