

Brown and his critics must admit their errors

It is a huge mistake to underestimate the PM and his achievements, says **Irwin Stelzer**. But he himself must learn that he has made serious mistakes and adjust accordingly

Not even his severest critics doubt Gordon Brown's intelligence. They might object to the causes in which it has been enlisted, but they knew that it is both formidable and restless. Nor do the Prime Minister's critics doubt that he has a coherent vision of where he wants to take Great Britain, what sort of society he would like to create (the assumption being that it is in his power to do just that). Again, they might disagree on the consequences of striving for greater equality of income and wealth distribution, or the efficacy of stuffing an unreformed public sector with cash. But they have no doubt that Gordon Brown knows where he is going.

Nor, in their quieter moments, should his critics disagree with some of the policies he brought with him to No. 11. That's when control of the economy passed to that address from No. 10, as a result either of a unique power-sharing deal between Prime Minister and Chancellor, or of the differing interests and talents of the occupants of the two highest offices in the UK.

There is little doubt that when New Labour took over from an exhausted Tory party the nation's infrastructure had been starved for too long, the public services neglected, the nation's economic policy in need of refreshment. Nor is there any doubt that Labour's inheritance included the enormous asset of the Thatcher revolution: a largely privatised economy, trade unions finally obliged to defer to the will of Parliament as expressed in its legislation, and a robust private sector operating in a society in which success and wealth were no longer considered signs of criminal or at minimum economically predatory behaviour.

Enter Gordon Brown and his intelligence in the service of his vision of a society in which children would be rescued from poverty, entrepreneurs would be encouraged to create businesses by changes in the tax code, benefits would be distributed to offset some of the harsher consequences of the market, work would replace welfare and society's social ills would succumb to a variety of programmes from state-provided early-childhood care to means-tested pensions for the elderly. One might say cradle-to-grave care from the state, had that term not taken on a meaning that colours the debate.

Some of the Brown programmes worked. Healthcare improved a bit, although nowhere in line with the £43 billion of extra cash Brown showered on the NHS, as Sir Derek Wanless's

recent report makes clear. The City became a contender for the title of world's leading financial centre, a place to which the globe's financial moguls flock (although not necessarily to become domiciled!). The Bank of England was freed of some (not all) of the political control that had contributed to periodic bouts of inflation. The economy grew steadily. Sterling was retained as the nation's currency, and with it the possibility of fiscal and monetary policies far more sensible than those in euroland.

But along with these achievements came a crumbling of the nation's social structure. Brown's refusal to fund the construction of new prisons contributed to an increase in crime that has made many of Britain's streets unsafe. Well-intentioned programmes to assist toddlers have been proven to be expensive failures. The pension system is in disarray. Educational standards are dismal and falling. Immigration policy remains incoherent. Millions have withdrawn from the active economy to cash in on the benefits heaped on malingers, unto the third generation thereof, while resources available to the deserving poor are drained away. The tax system is so burdensome and complex that it brings into question Britain's ability to compete in an increasingly globalised world. And the nation's brave soldiers live in squalor at home and die in large numbers overseas because their vehicles are inadequate, their communications systems obsolete and their helicopters too few to support them on the ground. All this when Brown had uncontested control of economic policy and the allocation of the nation's resources.

Back to intelligence and vision, and the Prime Minister's ample supply of both. Those who wish Brown well are hoping that he can overcome a major failing: the refusal to admit error, most recently made blindingly apparent by his decision to sacrifice credibility merely to show how stubborn he can be in sticking to his no-referendum-no-matter-what-I-promised position. If he is to realise his vision of a Britain that will be a better place because he decided to make politics his life, he must end those programmes that have demonstrably failed in their noble goals. Leave his clique of supporters behind for a weekend, study the facts — the stuff on which he ordinarily thrives — and change course where needed. It is no use pretending to be a change agent while refusing to toss overboard the failed programmes of his past decade in de facto charge of the country.

Fortunately for the Prime Minister, we now have a body of evidence that allows him to sort out his successes from his failures, and points the way to the changes — 'adjustments' might be a more appealing word to him — that are needed. No matter what else is to be done about crime, more prisons are necessary simply to keep dangerous thugs off the street and prevent judges from using overcrowding as an excuse to release them into other people's neighbourhoods. No matter what else is to be done about the millions who prefer the couch to the workplace, a tough-minded, Rudy Giuliani/Bill Clinton-style programme that makes it economically impossible to exist on benefits is an essential. No good to talk about luring people back into the active economy while paying them more to stay out of it than to enter it.

No matter what else is to be done about the failures of the education system, greater freedom for teachers to innovate (*pace* Ed Balls), for good schools to expand and failing schools to close, and for parents to select schools of their choice is a basic requirement. No matter what else is to be done about immigration, rapid deportation of illegal aliens is one component of a new policy, and insistence on English-language proficiency for all immigrants is another — whether the newcomers come from within or outside the EU. Whatever else is to be done about home-grown terrorists, a deportation programme — even one that violates EU law — is essential. No good to say Britain no longer has control over these matters while at the same time urging the nation not to worry about the further surrenders of sovereignty explicit and implicit in what Brown in an unguarded moment called the new 'constitution'.

And whatever else has to be done to ensure Britain's prosperity in a tough, competitive world, taxes have to come down, the tax code simplified, and the tax burden shifted from work and risk-taking to consumption.

We know how to do all of these things, as the studious Prime Minister well knows. It is often said that all that is lacking is the political will. Not so. What is lacking is a willingness by the Prime Minister to admit error, and to pursue his vision of a decent Great Britain by means other than those he has tried. The hand-to-hand combat of Prime Minister's Question Time, and the cheers and jeers of backbenchers, discourage what are derisively called U-turns, and should instead be called the application of experience.

'When I make a mistake, it's a beaut,' New York's successful mayor of yore, Fiorello LaGuardia famously said. So, too, with Gordon Brown. If he will contemplate more than the cosmetic changes he has introduced to show that he is no Tony Blair, and 'move on', as the saying now goes, Brown would demonstrate that he knows just how to use his intellect in the service of his vision. Better that than putting lipstick on the pig of the failed policies of the past decade.

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