

Gordon's good intentions will hurt

In an age in which the life stories of politicians are trotted out to win sympathy from audiences for the trials and tribulations they have overcome, Gordon Brown's is genuinely related to his political positions, rather than mere sop for the wet-hatlike crowd. The man and his politics are one.

His desire to replace class distinctions with equal opportunity arises from seeing classmates unable to realise their potential because they could not afford an advanced education. His devotion to the NHS stems from two experiences, only one of which he mentioned – the saving in his sight – and a genuine belief in the goodness and selflessness of the doctors and nurses who toil in this government monolith. His notion of community responsibility stems from lessons learned from his father. In short, his politics is an extension of his life experience, not something grafted on to enhance voter appeal.

Which is a mixed blessing. Gordon Brown wants to do good. And good to him means following his father's instruction: "We must be givers as well as getters." Laudable – but not if what you are giving isn't yours in the first place. Every gift this Prime Minister wishes to bestow is paid for by the taxpayer, or by some other taxpayer whose income is more accessible to the tax collector. So children are to get more early learning programmes; 300,000 youngsters will have one-

to-one tuition in reading, and another 300,000 in maths; every secondary pupil is to get "a personal tutor"; 600,000 will have grants for university education; those in mid-career are to be helped to "move up the ladder... [and] upgrade their skills and jobs"; government support for "all children and all families" is planned: nine months' paid maternity leave for all mothers "on the road to 12 months' paid maternity leave"; an increase in the minimum wage; more paid holidays; aid for two million first-time home-buyers; and pensions linked to earnings rather than the cost of living.

Goodbye, Prudence, hello Profligacy. The Chancellor who insisted that every benefit be costed and paid for – out of higher taxes, more often than not – has morphed into the Prime Minister who has never met a costly benefit he is not prepared to sponsor.

Only a cynic would attribute this to an attempt to have something for every voter. It is more than that – and therefore a more durable part of his plans for Britain. It is a programme that he has waited with decreasing patience to bless Britain with, or impose upon it, depending on your point of view.

The problem is that it is massively inconsistent with his other goal – to maintain and increase national prosperity in the face of mounting competition from China and India – requiring the programmes he is proposing. For implementation of



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these goals will be costly. Some will require higher taxes. Others are more shrewdly crafted: they impose costs on the businesses the Prime Minister at other times says he wishes to foster. Those costs will either reduce profit margins, and hence investment, or be passed on to consumers as hidden taxes.

Either way, they will reduce British competitiveness as surely as the work rules and social costs that brought stagnation to the European nations with whose economies Brown is suddenly so eager to join forces. Brown argues that the benefits in increased skills and productivity will outweigh costs but the man who specialises in quantified studies offers none for us to consider.

The speech contained other massive contradictions. The Prime Minister seems to recognise that patients and parents want more personal attention – "a National

Health Service that is also a personal health service". More power to the people. And how is this personalisation to be achieved? Not by empowering patients with greater choice – his Government has made clear that it wants fewer private sector health-care players who do provide choice, and he has contempt for the idea of patients' passports. The Prime Minister digs deep into his history and centralising tendencies, and proposes more targets, control over GP hours, and the other paraphernalia of control that have driven up costs with no proportionate increase in benefits.

Report after report shows that Britain lags behind most countries in health care outcomes in such things as cancer survival rates – even behind the US system that Brown and his colleagues hold up to scorn when trying to divert attention from NHS failings. Yet there is to be no relaxation of the targets that Brown has created over the past decade. The deep cleaning of the hospitals is not to be accompanied by a deep cleaning of failed policies.

And how is the educational system to achieve the Prime Minister's goal – "not one size fits all but responding to individual needs"? Surely not by empowering parents to find the school best suited to their children's talents. Instead, city academies once free to experiment with curricula will have to adhere to the national curriculum. It is the Prime

Minister who will determine those individual needs, and how to meet them.

In short, there is a disconnect between stated intention and proposed policy. The intention is to create a consumer-friendly welfare state; the policy is central direction, targets, and inevitably the higher taxes that are the most complete way of depriving consumers of choice – by commanding a larger portion of their incomes. The intention is New Labour; the implementing policy is Old Labour.

Perhaps worst of all is the gap between the democratic rhetoric and the back-of-the-hand the Prime Minister gives to public opinion. Several times he mentioned his travels around the country to listen to what the people want. He promises to remain in perpetual listening mode. Unless, of course, the voices tell him that they want a referendum on the new EU constitution – in which case he will ignore them, and the promises contained in his party's manifestos.

None of this is intended to deny the nobility of Gordon Brown's goal of extending opportunity so that everyone can "rise as far as their talents can take them" and not be hobbled or unduly advantaged by circumstance of birth. It is merely to question the path he has chosen to take to reach that goal.

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