

# More a guide dog than a poodle



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Tony Blair exits laughing, beyond the reach of an electorate he betrayed by surrendering still another portion of British sovereignty after promising to consult the voters before doing so. If his decision to allow the EU to create a foreign minister ruffles too many feathers, well, let Gordon Brown tend to the smoothing.

Blair, meanwhile, is off to replicate his Northern Ireland success in the Middle East, courtesy of George Bush (who knows pay-back time when he sees it), work on his book, and tour the US speech circuit. Then, the man-at-loose-ends will present Nicolas Sarkozy with the bill for his perfidy - the presidency of the EU. To paraphrase Robert Bolt: It profits a man nothing to lose his soul for the whole world, but for Brussels?

Gordon Brown will be the Prime Minister of one of 27 nations that are represented in the world by an EU foreign minister. That America will be less concerned about Britain's views, and Brown more of a ceremonial than a substantive visitor to the White House, is mere frosting on Blair's going-away-party cake, a getting his own back for the times when the Chancellor refused to tell his boss what was in the nation's budget.

America, its reliable British ally replaced by an EU unable to find a few thousand more troops to send to Afghanistan, will find unilateralism increasingly attractive as Brown and his new EU masters pursue their "common foreign and security policy... actively and unreservedly in the spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity".

As for Blair, 'tis a pity he's a, well, frantic seeker of the approval of his euro-colleagues, for he came into office with a foreign policy vision that, if implemented, would have positioned Britain for world leadership in the 21st century.

In his now-famous speech in Chicago in 1999, when the White House was still a mere gleam in the eye of Texas governor George W. Bush, Blair laid out the doctrine that should have been the centrepiece of Western foreign policy: "Appeasement does not work. We cannot turn our backs on ... the violation of human rights ... if we still want to be secure. ... The spread of our values makes us safer."

This was Blair at his best: guided by a sense that there is indeed right and wrong, and that democratically elected politicians have the responsibility of distinguishing one from the other, he was willing to rise above some of the now-archaic notions that deterred Western democracies from stopping the slaughter in Kosovo, or deposing a murderous dictator in Iraq. We need, he said, "a more subtle blend of mutual self-interest and moral purpose in defending the values we cherish".

That vision informed perhaps his greatest foreign policy achievement: the instant realisation that the attack on America on September 11, and the later attacks on Madrid and London (to mention only two) are part of a long war between Islamic fanatics who would destroy our way of life, and a West that remained asleep while only Bush, Spain's Aznar and Australia's John Howard seemed awake to the danger. The departing Prime Minister has valiantly called for the West to realise what is at stake, and even more bravely shown a willingness to make the difficult trade-offs between civil liberties and national security that a long war requires.

Blair also clearly saw that Britain's interests are best served by cultivating and enriching the special relationship with America. His greatest fear was an American retreat into isolationism. Cynics talked then, and still do, of a one-way street, of poodles. They were wrong. Blair succeeded in persuading President Bush to swallow hard and appeal to the UN for support before finally deciding that the American national interest trumped Jacques Chirac's cranky sense of French grandeur.

He persuaded a reluctant American president to lay out a roadmap for peace in the Middle East. The road is pitted with holes from Hamas rockets, but it is still the best available device to move forward in that troubled region. He most recently used the goodwill he built up with the President to persuade Bush to concede that global warming just might be a threat, and to convene a meeting to consider steps that might be taken without dire consequences for the industrialised economies. More a guide dog than a poodle.

Then there is Northern Ireland, where Blair's ability to parlay the special relationship into support for his peace initiatives from Presidents Clinton and Bush led to a spectacular diplomatic success. I well remember suggesting to the Prime Minister during one of the low points of the up-and-down negotiation over IRA arms that he had failed, only to be told, "But the killing has stopped" - as indeed it had.

I also remember a pleasant Sunday afternoon on the lawn of a deserted 10 Downing Street, discussing British foreign policy. As requested, I had gone through the several studies of the possible impact on Britain of withdrawal from the EU, and concluded that the economic effect would be somewhere between nil and marginally positive.

Blair thought that irrelevant in the geopolitical scheme of things. If Britain is to be a great power, it must be a "bridge" between America and the EU. He was willing to pay his dues in Washington, and saw being at the heart of Europe and adoption of the euro as the dues he would have to pay at the other end of this 3,000-mile long bridge. In the event, it was not to be: Brown wisely put paid to Blair's euro ambitions, and Iraq eroded the Prime Minister's standing in old Europe.

Blair also provided moral leadership in the battle to marshal international aid to Africa's poorest nations. That he did not trouble himself with the question of reforming the corrupt recipient governments is another example of his famed inattention to "detail", but it cannot diminish the credit he gets for translating his moral revulsion at the misery of African children into tangible international aid programmes.

Even Blair's critics concede that he is a master politician who brought his party into the modern era and laid the basis for a consumer-driven welfare state. They should also concede that he did succeed in realising at least a portion of his foreign policy vision. Unfortunately for Britain, that vision came to include a diminished role for his country in world affairs.

