

The real reasons why Blair is still clinging on to office

It now seems imprudent for Tony Blair to have raised the standard by which he chose to be judged. Ordinary folk are deemed innocent until proved guilty. Blair chose a higher standard: "Purer than pure". Good thing he didn't suggest that politicians, like Caesar's wife, must be above suspicion.

I have no way of knowing what the Prime Minister did or did not do by way of offering peerages in return for loans. That's not the sort of question one puts over cocktails or dinner, not least because a denial would be the only available response, and therefore of no significance. Neither does anyone else know whether Blair approved the prohibited linkage of loans and peerages, or obstructed justice once the inquiry was launched.

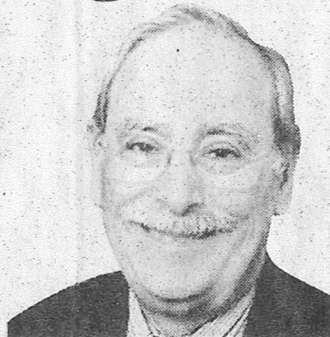
All anyone does know is that the latest round of baying for his blood was triggered by a police decision to interview him for a second time "as a witness, not as a suspect", to quote the police, and a police request to keep the fact of the interview secret until they, not he, decided it be made public. Hardly the stuff to justify David Cameron's demand that Blair resign, a demand not unrelated to the Tories' delusional notion that Gordon Brown will prove a less formidable opponent than Blair. Even the *Guardian* thinks "it would be wrong for him to go only because of this inquiry".

Also, I do know this: the Prime Minister is well aware that his authority is seeping away. But he

believes he retains enough to enable him to push forward his domestic and foreign programmes, and that is what he plans to do, no matter what delegation knocks on his Downing Street door.

In appraising this latest of several "Blair-must-go" campaigns, start with motive. True, the purest of motives cannot excuse a crime, but motive can throw some light on the incentive of the PM to cross the line between legality and illegality. Hope of personal financial enrichment surely would provide such temptation. But not even his accusers contend that Blair intended to profit personally and financially from the loans. Instead, he aimed to free the Labour Party from its financial dependence on the trade unions, which want to put paid to the PM's reforms of the health care and education systems that will give Britain a welfare state fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Get Blair gone, think the unions, and Brown will reverse the reforms they find so threatening – no matter that he has promised to pursue the New Labour reforms and might be more skilled at getting them sensibly implemented than Blair, who is no paragon at administration, has been able to do. Still, a question nags: why doesn't Blair say: "Who needs this aggro? I'll move into Connaught Square, write my book, make several million, and tour the American lecture circuit – they love me there, and the fees



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are fabulous. I might even mix in a bit of doing good, like my chum Bill Clinton."

Here we enter the realm of speculation, so a declaration of interest is in order to help you decide on the plausibility of what I like to think are my informed guesses. I admire Blair's decision to preserve the special relationship with my country. Cameron and William Hague might be eager to distance themselves from America, but since they also want to keep their distance from Europe, one has to wonder just where they will look when Britain needs friends.

The Prime Minister has paid a terrible political price for supporting American efforts to fight terrorism by creating a decent Iraqi state. He might not be much on history – indeed, he often seems unconcerned that many of his decisions wipe out centuries of British tradition – but he knows one big thing. As Andrew Roberts points out in his

wonderful *History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*, it is the alliance of the English-speaking peoples, and most importantly of Britain and America, that repeatedly has prevented the bad guys from taking over the world. Reagan antagonised many in his government by sticking with Britain in the Falklands, as Blair has done with America in Iraq. That's what English-speaking allies do.

Which is one reason, I suspect, that Blair resists demands that he step down, and now. He has preferred access to the White House, a prize purchased at high personal cost. It will be a long time before any successor will have that sort of access to the President. Blair believes that he can parlay his access into the start of meaningful negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis to solve their dispute. After all, he did bring an end to the killings in Ireland.

In my view, he is wrong. The road to Baghdad does not, as he believes, "run through Jerusalem". Besides, neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis can produce a credible negotiating team. And when one party is dedicated to the destruction of the other, a negotiated settlement is simply not on the cards. But one has to admire Blair's trying.

Blair also believes that it is worth suffering his present difficulties in order to cement his reforms in place. Once voters get a taste of choice, they will never again cede power over their health and their children's

education to union-dominated service providers. He wants to leave with consumers as kings, immune from being deposed by a union backlash. His theory is this: modern British consumers of these services want choice; suppliers fear that consumer choice will end the monopoly grip that permits them to mistreat the public; the unions fear that competition will prevent wages and pensions, already above those prevailing in the private sector, from rising further. Overcome these entrenched interests or watch support for the welfare state wither.

Is lingering for this reason inconsistent with his repeated statements that reform is safe in Gordon Brown's hands? Of course. But no powerful politician has ever really believed that his (or her) successor can match his (or her) own skill. Think Churchill-Eden, or Thatcher-Major.

Both Churchill and Thatcher were right. But the past is not necessarily prologue. Gordon Brown is not likely to pull a Suez, and even less likely to become ensnared in a financial fiasco such as the ERM. But he will not have Blair's clout in Washington, nor his ability to urge America to pursue the prize of peace in the Middle East. And nothing appeals to Tony Blair more than arranging an end to killings. He's that sort of guy.

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