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Cameron is much more than sizzle. And Obama knows it

To suggest the president would deride a future British leader is fanciful. The special relationship looks safe for now

With Labour's poll numbers headed south, and its policy cupboard bare, its fans have decided that the personal is, indeed, the political. So what better than to argue that David Cameron is regarded as all sizzle and no substance by the most popular political figure on the world stage, Barack Obama. The US president, we are told in the New Statesman, regards Gordon Brown as a man of "substance", but David Cameron as all "sizzle".

Leave aside the Cameron team's assertion that they have checked with White House sources and hear only denials. They would say that, wouldn't they? Ask instead whether it is reasonable to assume that super-cautious Obama, a lawyer without an impetuous bone in his body, is likely to have derided a man with whom he might have to do business for years to come. The answer is that Obama is as likely to have shared that thought with Cameron's political opponents as Thomas More was to have told Richard Rich of his opposition to Henry VIII's divorce.

So set aside snide charges and predictable denials, and take a look at the facts. The most important is that the story is half true: Gordon Brown is indeed a man of considerable substance. That is generally agreed by those who have watched him at international meetings for more than a decade, is confirmed by my own experience discussing complicated policy issues with him over the years, and was most recently borne out by his leadership in recapitalising hard-hit banks, a move followed by Obama and other world leaders. That doesn't make him right, or telegenic, but it does make him a man of substance.

But Britain can produce more than one substantive politician at a time. Cameron, it is true, at first seemed – to me, among many others – more sizzle than substance, in retrospect not surprising for a young man whose first necessary chore was to prove that Tories do not allow children and pensioners to freeze in winter. Time marched on, and with it Cameron's immersion in the economic and geopolitical issues facing Britain.

Whether Cameron's growth on the job enabled Obama to stamp him "substantive" we will never know. But we do know that the president, who had no obligation to do so and who is enough of a politician to know that a meeting would be a big plus for a politician new on the world scene, chose to meet with Cameron during his visit to Britain for the G20 meeting in April – privately, at Winfield House, the Regent Park residence of the US ambassador. If this were merely a drive-by hello, Obama would not have brought with him secretary of state Hillary Clinton, national security adviser General Jim Jones, treasury secretary Tim Geithner and deputy chief of staff Jim Messina.

Four major topics were discussed in depth: the economic situation; Iran's drive for nuclear weapons; reform of Nato; and Afghanistan. Cameron has long taken a position similar to the president's – that the goals in Afghanistan must be clear, that the command must be unified rather than shared, that reconstruction and nation-building are as important as military success, but that the military effort must be properly resourced. The president, having been turned down by other allies when he asked for more troops, could not regard as mere sizzle Cameron's promise "to honour all of Britain's commitments in Afghanistan".

The latter, of course, is a bit soft around the edges, as Cameron has also indicated that expenditures on the nation's underfunded military (for details, see [A Compelling Necessity](#), a recent report by Andrew Roberts and Allen Sykes) would not be exempt from his review of spending should he find himself in No 10 in spring 2010. But there can be little question that in weighing priorities – expansion of the welfare state versus adequate funding of the war in Afghanistan – Cameron is more likely than Brown to lean in the direction of the military.

Nor is there any doubt, as one source informs me, that Cameron regards good relations with the US as "exceptionally important ... We started in politics with Mrs Thatcher. Good relations with America are in our marrow".

The open question is whether Barack Obama so regards good relations with Britain. The president is not a particularly sentimental sort, and has no desire for a Roosevelt-Churchill, Reagan-Thatcher, Bush-Blair cosiness. But he has now made the war in Afghanistan his own, and needs Britain to step up its effort there, needs Britain to co-ordinate its new scheme for the regulation of financial dealings with his own, and knows that the two countries' security services are heavily dependent on one another. That requires substance, not sizzle. Brown has it, and so does Cameron. Both admire America for its entrepreneurial drive.

Which is good news. Talk of the "special relationship" might make blood boil on the Labour backbenches, and Brown worry about diverting funds from his welfare state. But history suggests that relationship has done a good deal to preserve world order, without which all other goals are in the end unobtainable.