

# Requiem for a heavyweight

Gordon Brown saw it as his duty to reconcile equity and efficiency in pursuit of a fairer Britain, says **Irwin Stelzer**. Attempting to achieve that goal is what brought him down

It's a dirty business. When you're on top, everyone wants something from you; when you're not, well, as Billie Holiday says, 'God bless the child that's got his own.' It is a business of sharp elbows, few loyalties, and one in which winning is all that matters. That's how Rod Serling describes the boxing racket in his *Requiem for a Heavyweight*. He could just as well have been describing politics. Tony Blair might have been the Labour party's meal ticket (as Margaret Thatcher was the Tories') through three general elections, just as Serling's boxer was the meal ticket for his managers and entourage. But when a boxer, even a champion, gets a bit punchy, when his winning streak seems to be coming to an end, dump him in favour of a more clunking fist. 'If you want loyalty, get a dog', President Lyndon B. Johnson is believed to have advised young politicians.

Except that politics as practised by some few involves more than merely winning. That doesn't mean that winning is of no matter to them; it means that winning is a means not an end, a way to govern, rather than merely to be in government. Winston Churchill wanted to stop fascism from over-running Europe; Clement Attlee wanted to put in place a fairer, more decent society; Margaret Thatcher wanted to reverse what she was told was Britain's inevitable decline; Tony Blair wanted to make the Labour party fit for purpose in the 20th century; and Gordon Brown...

The final verdict will have to be written by historians more detached than this writer, whose regard for Gordon so puzzles his conservative friends. But an interim requiem for this heavyweight is surely in order.

Too many have pointed out that Britain owes its escape from the clutches of euro-land to Brown, and that it was Brown who made the Bank of England more or less independent of direct political pressure, for me to belabour the point. But less well acknowledged is the fact that Brown shot down the Blair-Mandelson drive to scupper sterling by delivering some 18 volumes of economic analysis to the Cabinet a few days before it met to decide whether or not to join the euro, inviting any who thought Britain's interests would be served by surrendering control over its monetary policy to the euro-crazy to rebut his conclusions. None did. And few understand that one thing that has

prevented the rating agencies from downgrading UK sovereign debt is their confidence in the independence of the Bank of England and its governor, Mervyn King.

Gordon Brown styles himself a son of the manse — true as far as it goes. Anyone who doubts that he learned from his parents that one does not cross to the other side of the road when seeing a person in distress, doesn't know the man. But he is also a son of the town in which Adam Smith first saw the light of day, and it is impossible to over-estimate the influence of that fact on his thinking and policies. As Brown sees it, it is the job of a politician to reconcile the moral teachings of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* with what he believes to be the somewhat different economic teachings of *The Wealth of Nations*. Never mind that these are mutually reinforcing, rather than somewhat contradictory tracts. In simple terms, Brown took it as his burden to reconcile the goals of equity and efficiency — to figure out how to maximise economic growth so as to have the wherewithal to make Britain a fairer society by redistributing income from the better off to the less well off. Faced with a morally unacceptable situation, laissez-faire becomes a non-starter.

A goal is one thing: its implementation within the cauldron that is Labour party politics quite another. Brown is a great fan of the Victorian historian Gertrude Himmelfarb: indeed, he wrote an introduction to her book on what she calls the English Enlightenment and he prefers to call the Scottish Enlightenment. Himmelfarb admires the Victorians for establishing private-sector institutions to care for the deserving poor. Translated into Labour party ideology, that becomes government help for anyone with



'You can buy anything at Harrods —  
I bought Harrods at Harrods.'

an income below the national average, even those who prefer the couch to the workplace — accompanied by handouts to the unneeded in order to buy their support for income redistribution.

Gordon's struggle to balance efficiency and equity also explains his ultimately failed immigration policy. He better than most understands that Britain must now compete in a globalised economy with many nations having lower labour costs. Immigration could provide the supply of low-cost labour that would keep Britain competitive.

So open the gates, not in pursuit of anything as vague and 'modern' as Tony Blair's desire for a more cosmopolitan Britain, but in pursuit of economic growth and all the benefits growth brings. But a funny thing happened on the way to increased efficiency. Several funny things in fact: an influx of foreigners attracted by the welfare state he was making ever more generous; an influx so large as to make British natives feel strangers in their own land; immigrants willing to work for wages that many British workers found less acceptable than available benefits. Result: a vast increase in ailments that only disability benefit can cure.

In the context of Labour party politics, there was nothing the Prime Minister could do about this, even if he had been so minded. Labour governments do not specialise in distinguishing between the deserving and undeserving poor, and when James Purnell began urging them to do just that he laid the basis for the frustration that would eventually lead him to give up politics, one hopes only temporarily.

Gordon Brown is a careful student not only of Smith and Himmelfarb, but of John Maynard Keynes, who taught a modern version of the biblical principle that one should lay away stores in good times, and draw them down in bad. So Brown was able to lead the world in proposing that the recent crisis be met in part with a stimulus package that includes deficit spending. Keynes would have been pleased. But the Labour party and, alas, Brown himself forgot the part about running surpluses in good times. After a brief whirl around the floor with Prudence, he abandoned her in favour of Profligacy, so that when hard times came the cupboard was bare. Which is why Britain now finds itself struggling to avoid the fate of Greece.

It is facile to say that Brown was brought down by his rumpled suits, or his impatience with the less bright (a trait I never witnessed in our many policy discussions, which were always civil and data-laden), or even his inability to achieve the telegenic smoothness of Nick Clegg and David Cameron. His failure was to be unable to realise a rather noble ambition — to reconcile society's need to maximise economic growth with his inner command to shape a decent Britain. He thought an activist state could do that without sapping private initiatives to do good and incentives to create wealth. He got the answer wrong, but not the question.