

What Washington thought of Cameron: smooth, genial, evasive — and tough

He came, he saw, and, to the surprise of many in Washington, David Cameron conquered. Those who have been exposed to his personal charm were less surprised. For them, the surprise — perhaps they should have known better than to be surprised — came from his willingness to resort to evasion. Faced with a specific question about his attitude towards Israel, the Prime Minister gave the usual answer about a two-state solution, the need for negotiations, etc. A few days later, before a Muslim rather than an American audience, he decided that Gaza is a prison, without mentioning that Hamas is the jailer, and that there are few prisons in which the inmates launch rockets at neighbouring countries.

Perhaps because of their shared hostility towards Israel, the Prime Minister hit it off better with the American President than any since Tony Blair found a third-way partner in Bill Clinton and a companion-in-arms in George W. Bush. And to his credit, Cameron did it his way. Whereas Blair struggled to avoid acknowledging that Britain is the junior partner in what Obama now calls a 'truly special relationship', Cameron found no difficulty in recognising that to be the case. Whereas Blair played down any differences with his American counterpart, Cameron simply acknowledged them and moved on.

No, he would not order an investigation of BP's role in the freeing of Abdel Baset Ali al-Megrahi, as the President and a gaggle of senators wanted him to do. But he would make sure that any relevant papers were sent to the BP-phobic Americans. No, he would not abandon his budget-cutting, even if that is contrary to what Obama's team believes is in order — different strokes for different folks in this matter as with audiences. If Obama feels the US needs another stimulus, fine; Britain will go its own way.

Two, young, attractive, activist politicians, the American expanding the state, the British leader attempting to cut it down to affordable size, each in need of the support of the other — the President to pursue his Afghanistan strategy and Middle East agenda, the Prime Minister to gain the prestige accorded foreign politicians who receive a cordial reception from the head of the world's most powerful nation, both to have continued access to the others' intelligence and security services.

The overwhelming impression of those who met with Cameron is that he is smooth, genial,

well spoken ('a matter of breeding', one slightly sarcastic observer commented), and tougher than they thought he would be. Which is one reason they take at face value his promise to stick with America in Afghanistan until 2015 (the for-home-consumption variant is 'We're not going to be there in five years time'), at which time he believes the Afghan army will be ready to take over maintaining security in that troubled country.

His goal is to remove Afghanistan as a haven for those who threaten British security: no more, no less. All of this display of backbone, of course, must be considered in light of Cameron's demonstrated willingness to tailor his remarks to his perception of what will sell well with the audience at hand.

Fortunately for Israel, foreign policy is not the Prime Minister's primary area of interest. One colleague who met with Cameron concluded that he plans to be a domestic-policy Prime Minister, treating foreign policy as an extension of trade and other economic policies, a view subsequently verified by the Prime Minister's plan to take a large trade delegation to India. Few Americans recall that Tony Blair had a similar goal, as did Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush; the fates willed otherwise.

On the domestic front, the Washington commentariat had a mixed reaction. Liberals, in the American sense, are unexcited about Cameron's budget-cutting, which they see as an effort to shrink the state just as their President is moving to expand ours — Obama's new appointee to run the healthcare system is a wide-eyed admirer of the NHS. The conservatives with whom I have spoken see things differently: they believe that if Cameron succeeds in cutting spending as much as he says he will, and the British economy survives with minimal social upheaval, he will have created a model that conservatives will be able to cite when they launch a similar effort here.

They are less certain about his 'Big Society', which Cameron has described as his 'passion', as distinguished from getting Britain's

finances in order, which he describes as his 'job'. Cameron is wary of being found guilty-by-association with American conservatives, whom many in Britain erroneously believe are caravan-dwelling Tea Partiers obsessed with God, Guns and Gays. And he doesn't want to be seen as cutting spending because he has a secret agenda to reduce the role of government in people's lives, for which deficit-cutting is clever cover. But he does, and it's not so secret.

Cameron's 'Big Society' is nothing more and nothing less than a plan for a massive transfer of power from the state to those Burkeian little platoons that 'real' Tories profess to remember in the pre-Labour governments era, and that American conservatives would dearly like to take power here. But the platoons have been decimated by 50 years of socialism — there are no institutions to which Cameron can hand off power. And he knows it. Which is why he will try to create them by funding the training of community organisers, among other things. Since that's how Barack Obama got his start in politics, and it certainly didn't make him an advocate of limited government, conservative observers here permitted themselves a rueful chuckle when Cameron chose that example. Out of the Prime Minister's earshot, several of those with whom he met said that given the vagueness of Cameron's plans, they were relieved that such as David Willetts, well known here to the conservative think-tank set, will participate in shaping this still-unformed idea into a workable programme.

Americans don't pay much attention to British Prime Ministers. Most know Winston Churchill for his wartime heroics, Margaret Thatcher for her political romance with Ronald Reagan and her steadfastness when Saddam invaded Iraq, and Tony Blair for his empathetic and eloquent reaction to the Islamic terrorists' destruction of the World Trade Center.

Cameron has a long way to go to achieve the recognition here, and the acclaim accorded some of his predecessors. But in his first visit as Prime Minister he did not put a foot wrong. Whether his tale of two cities — pro-Israel in Washington, anti-Israel in Ankara — will take some of that shine off by raising questions about his credibility remains to be seen.



'Very oily.'

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