

The Guest Column

Irwin Stelzer

Why we should be grateful to Tony

No, this is not another review of Tony Blair's new book, which I have yet to read, but rather a response to the irrational and overheated reaction to the former prime minister's reappearance on the political scene.

Begin by stopping the whingeing about how Blair was in the US when his book was published, a way for his enemies to get at him for his pro-US attitude. The fact is that the book launch was scheduled for London, but when President Barack Obama asked Blair, who has been active in bringing the Palestinians to the table, to come to Washington for the initial meeting between Israel's prime minister and the leader of the Palestinians' Fatah faction, Blair decided that peace was more important than flogging books. Hardly an example of his alleged greed.

Then remain unsurprised that he timed publication to coincide with and influence the election of a new leader of the Labour Party. It would seem that Blair is, shock, horror, a politician. Indeed, a politician who cares enough about the future of Britain to use such influence as he might have to encourage party members to keep the flickering flame of New Labour alive. You might disagree that that is a good idea, but you have to concede that, by timing publication as he has, Blair has shown that he cares about the future of Britain.

Public servant

One more group of anti-Blair folks deserve mention. It seems that since he left office Blair has been making loadsamoney, a condition derided by Lord Kinnock in the days before he and his wife decided to feed at the EU trough, rather than risk their fates in the cruel, hard world of commerce. In part, the left levellers are not fond of anyone making more than the national average income; in part, they forget that Blair could have earned far more as a practising lawyer in the years he spent at No 10, but chose instead public service, with its gratifying psychic income, while his wife dutifully held the family's financial fort.

Consider the state of politics before Blair made that triumphant march into No 10, after bringing a reluctant Labour Party out of the wilderness. Labour had been out of power for almost two decades, and the country was being run by a tired and increasingly corrupt Tory party, faction-riven since it had decided that

its leader Margaret Thatcher should be replaced. Now, Britain benefits from the yeastiness of a two-, perhaps three-party democracy. Chalk up an achievement for Blair.

Blair never succeeded in persuading his chancellor of the correctness of his policy positions. Gordon Brown, for personal and policy reasons, proved to be an obstacle to making Labour really New. But it is easy to say now that Blair should have sacked his colleague and rival. Easier now than then. Blair, after all, was in the Labour Party but not of it. He was their ticket to power, but not their soulmate: a regular guy, but not quite red enough in tooth and claw to suit many of the New-in-name-only Labour backbenchers. I recall once asking Blair how he could abide John Prescott, who could neither match the prime minister's way with a coherent sentence nor run a wheel stall, much less a

Blair brought a reluctant Labour Party out of the political wilderness

huge department. The reply told much about Blair's refusal to sack Brown: "I have very few lines into the party, and John is one of them." (Not being a diary-keeper, I paraphrase our conversation, held on a helicopter pad the day before the 1997 election.)

Blair was the party's meal ticket, its head; Brown was its historic conscience and its heart, the man who inundated an unreformed public sector with funds, who stuffed the mouths of the NHS bureaucracy with gold (Bevan had reserved that bonanza for doctors), and loaded taxes on to the upper- and middle-income groups so despised by Old Labour. If you doubt that, just recall the euphoria at the 2007 party conference after Brown, uncontested, succeeded the man he had finally driven from office.

Then there is the Iraq war. I remember talking with Blair well before then, when I asked his permission to include his now-famous Chicago speech in a volume of essays I was editing. In that speech, written by Blair by hand (his computer skills were, and remain, er, limited), the prime minister laid out the case for intervention in nations in which the leaders

abuse their populations. That position came in for severe criticism from the left when it turned out that implementing a moral foreign policy might actually require the use of force in the ugly, real world in which politicians operate. Stopping slaughter in Sierra Leone or the genocide of Muslims by Serbs is acceptable, but Iraq is a different matter, for several reasons.

Puppet master

First, say Blair's critics, he acted as America's poodle, a puppet manipulated by the hated George W Bush, the man who denied the BBC's candidate, Al Gore, the presidency. Actually, it was Blair who persuaded a very reluctant President Bush to sign up to the "road map" to peace in the Middle East, arguably a precursor of the current round of negotiations.

No matter. The pertinent question is whether Blair's critics, some of whom want him tried as a war criminal, the more measured of whom merely violently disrupt book signings, are to be taken seriously. The clear answer is "no" if leaders of democratic countries are to be able to defend the national interest with whatever measures seem necessary to them, and with support from the democratically elected legislatures whose agreement they must have.

Consider this. The current coalition government says it will stay in Afghanistan until 2015. It is certain that brave British soldiers and many Afghans, some terrorists, some innocent bystanders, will die during that time. Should David Cameron begin hiring a team of lawyers to defend himself in The Hague? Should Nick Clegg, who is going along reluctantly, but going along nevertheless, do the same? Should we hold posthumous trials for Winston Churchill (Dresden), Clement Attlee (nuclear proliferation), Franklin Roosevelt (internment of Japanese Americans), Harry Truman (Hiroshima and Nagasaki), Jack Kennedy (Bay of Pigs), Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon (Vietnam)? Or, even if you disagree with those actions – as I do not – should we accept that we live in dangerous times, and that honest leaders make honest mistakes as they try to divine the national interest? ●

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