
BRITISH POLITICAL LEADERSHIP FROM CHURCHILL TO BLAIR⁺:

A Class Act

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We live in strange times. Life is mimicking art, alarmingly. Here is the plot of the nineteenth century Gilbert and Sullivan light opera, *Iolanthe*. Strephon is an odd lad. He is a fairy above the waist; he is a human being below. He is the son of a union between Iolanthe (a fairy) and the Lord Chancellor—a thousand-year-old office, which supervises the British judiciary. Strephon goes into politics. He enters the House of Commons where he becomes leader of both parties at once (these are, of course, the Liberals and the Conservatives: in Gilbert and Sullivan's time, there was no Labour Party). As leader of both parties, he is therefore in a position to pass any legislation that he chooses. He decides to reform the House of Peers, i.e. Gilbert's lightly disguised name for the House of Lords. He does this by abolishing the hereditary right of Peers to sit in the House. He replaces it with entry through competitive examination in mathematics. Faced with this revolution, the peers all give up in despair, marry fairies, and go off to live in fairyland. The queen of the fairies marries the busby-wearing guardsman who stands in his sentry-box outside the Palace of Westminster.

Strephon Blair is an odd lad. A middle-class public schoolboy, from a conservative family, his early life showed no burning zeal to adhere either to the Labour or the Conservative Party, but rather an interest in evangelical Christianity and rock

“British Political Leadership from Churchill to Blair” was the topic of The Fletcher School's first annual London Alumni Symposium held on December 6, 2004. The following three papers are based on the presentations given at the symposium. Professor Prins is currently the Alliance Research Professor at the London School of Economics and Columbia University. He was formerly a Fellow and the Director of Studies in History at Emmanuel College and a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Cambridge for more than 20 years. During the later 1990s, Prins was Senior Fellow in the Office of the Special Adviser on Central and Eastern European Affairs, Office of the Secretary-General of NATO, Brussels, and the Visiting Senior Fellow in the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency of the UK Ministry of Defence, Farnborough.

music. He graduated modestly from Oxford as a lawyer. His pupil master, Derry Irvine, also took on another much more intense, politically-committed young pupil who becomes Strephon's wife. Both Blairs decide to enter politics. But it is Tony, not Cherie, who finds a winnable seat. And so he enters Parliament. John Smith, the leader of the Labour Party, dies young, and Blair rises to become leader of something called the "New Labour Project"—a graft onto the Labour Party that never quite takes. In effect, as an authoritarian idealist and ideological lightweight, faced with an

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opposition in disarray, he leads both parties at once. He becomes prime minister and, faced with a supine opposition, is able to pass any legislation that he chooses. Derry Irvine, his pupil-master, becomes Lord Chancellor. Blair decides to "reform" the House of Lords by abolishing the right of the hereditaries to sit. But he does not say what will replace them: let them be abolished first. And while he is about it, since he can pass any act that he wants, he decides to abolish the Lord Chancellorship and the law lords and other central pillars of the English constitution. He announces that he will replace the hereditaries not with an elected second chamber, but with row upon row of appointees. No one seriously believes protestations that these individuals will be appointed independently. Together, these constitute the most radical changes to the English constitution since the Glorious

Revolution of 1688, and altogether they compose the most profound constitutional crisis in British politics since 1911-14. How on earth did we get here?

To answer this question, it is important in the first instance to understand that, among British leaders from Churchill to Blair, in domestic politics, there are only four of real consequence. The first three are the amalgam war-time leader "Winston Churchill + Clement Attlee;" Blair's spiritual (if unacknowledged) mentor, Margaret Thatcher; and Blair himself. The wartime national government was the plate shop in which Beverage (a Liberal) hammered out the outlines of what became the post-Second World War welfare state, and economist John Maynard Keynes (also a Liberal) promoted the principles of Liberal Capitalism. Mrs Thatcher's administrations proved to be the most significant and (until Blair's) contentious of the era. The other prime minister of historical importance in the series of four, but for very different reasons, was Edward Heath. All the rest were either second-raters or third-raters.

The second-raters were those who were skillful, ruthless, but uninspired manipulators—the two Harolds: Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson. The third-raters were, for various different reasons, major bunglers: Sir Anthony Eden over Suez; James Callaghan in his nerveless mismanagement of the public sector; and John Major, bogged down by a party in civil war, burdened with the albatrosses of rail privatization and his inability to extricate the country or the Conservative Party from the consequences of Mrs. Thatcher's assassination by Geoffrey Howe, Michael Heseltine, and the other Federalists, assisted by the active meddling of Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission, over the European issue. Then there is one entirely forgettable prime minister. Alec Douglas Home succeeded a sick Macmillan in 1963 instead of the obvious candidate, Rab Butler, who Macmillan disliked. He stayed long enough to lose the 1964 election to Wilson, since the Tories were still under the lingering shadow of the Profumo scandal.¹

Note that, in this taxonomy, party is not a significant determinant of placement in the list. So what is the role of party? For convenience of orientation, there are three common-places (or maxims) about the twentieth century experiences of the three parties in British politics—one each for Labour, Conservative, and Liberal. The common-place for the Liberals is that British politics is a two-party system and, after the strange death of Liberal England at the departure of Lloyd George's administration, the Liberal Party has remained dead. Insofar as it has shown signs of life in the twentieth century (for example, when middle-class refugees from the Labour Party tried to re-animate it as a Social Democratic party), it has only been the life of the un-dead.

The common-place about the Labour Party is that, if one reviews its entire history, one sees that after 1924, its principal function in British politics has been to purge the Conservative Party, enabling it then to recover from whatever bilious impropriety had brought it into public disrepute and, now cleansed, to become again fit to rule. The common-place for the Conservatives will appear below.

Of the two already mentioned, obviously the more interesting is the Labour common-place because it is challenged by the question whether Tony Blair's election victory in 1997 was the moment to disprove it. Could the Labour Party, for the first time, acquire and retain the mantle of being the "natural party of government?" The three musketeers who together created the New Labour Project (the pollster, Philip Gould; the spin doctor, Alastair Campbell; and the *svengali* of modern British politics—Blair's closest political associate—Peter Mandelson) feared not. With refreshing candor, Alastair Campbell opened a lecture at the London School of Economics, in which he reflected upon the "Project" by admitting that the goading fear for the triumvirate, which drove them, was the belief that the Labour Party might never ever again gain power in Britain. That fear shaped their priorities and their actions during the years of preparation in the 1990s.

Winning had two essential prerequisites. First, there was, shared with the Clintonites (who had the same fear about the Democratic Party in the United States), an obsessive focus on the electoral mechanics of winning. Huge effort was poured into an aggressive variant of American “attack politics,” with an emphasis on instant rebuttal and the comprehensive management of the presentation of every aspect of the program in the media. For “spin doctors,” Marshall McLuhan’s single most famous observation had iconic centrality: the medium is indeed the message. If the medium is not controlled, then the message—and any other substantive aspect of message—will not get through to the electorate. The second prerequisite was that Tony Blair should become leader of the Labour Party. Why? Because, as the new leader of the Conservative Party observed in an apparent throw-away remark, Blair was clearly a nice, conservative, middle-class boy who could subliminally reassure “Middle England” that the Labour Party was now electable because a nice chap like him, who could curb the dogs of class warfare, was running it. No one who is not a conservative (with a small “c”) ever becomes prime minister of Britain. The three musketeers knew that. With these two essential ingredients in place, and assisted by the evident loss of appetite in the Conservatives (“We give the impression of being in office but not in power,” remarked Norman Lamont, the disastrous Chancellor of the Exchequer under Major²) in 1997, the Labour Party won. In his lecture, Campbell then went on to reflect on why the Conservative Party took so long to recover from this shock. It was, he observed, simply because they could not bring themselves to accept that the “New Labour Project” had any legitimate right to rule. He might have added the corollary—the evident glee of the newly minted New Labour ministers, who could hardly bring themselves to believe that they had won (“Is this gleaming limousine really for *me*?”).

But on the morning after, a deeper and more prescient observation was published by one of the most perceptive political commentators writing at the time, the late Hugo Young in *The Guardian*.³ He wrote about the towering expectations that accompanied Blair’s entry to No. 10 Downing Street. In that article, Young resonated with the Wordsworthian sense of excitement in that new dawn to be alive, but at the same time registered his anxiety. So much, he wrote, is now expected of this new and untried government; so much will be laid upon these young shoulders that, should they fail, he did not know what would come next, but he doubted very much whether it could be a return to politics as before. At this writing, when it is plain that the political trajectory of “New Labour” is no longer upwards, Hugo Young’s anxiety deserves to be recollected.

Upon taking power in 1997, the New Labour managers showed themselves to be very similar in another respect to those who had surrounded Bill Clinton at the beginning of the 1990s. So urgent and intense had been their focus upon winning the electoral power, which deep down they believed they might never obtain, that, having won it, they entered government with no specific program

worked out. The electorate did not know this at the time. This meant that, in both cases, the administrations were vulnerable to trip up on trivialities. Both did, incongruously.

In Clinton's case it was the question of allowing declared homosexuals to serve in the United States' armed forces. In Blair's case, it was the issue of banning fox-hunting. As one of the principal instigators of the ban, Tony Banks, M.P., has recently conceded, the issue has little to do with animal welfare. That matter was settled in 1952 by the report of the Scott-Henderson Committee on Cruelty to Wild Animals, the most comprehensive of its type ever held, which was established, under pressure from its back-bench class warriors, by the Attlee Labour government. It concluded that under the logic of Darwinian natural selection, controlling fox populations by hunting with dogs is the most humane and (because naturally selective) efficient of the available methods; it improves the health of the fox population. So if the issue is not cruelty to animals, then what is it? The issue, said Banks, is essentially "totemic:" and that is the point.⁴ Every Labour government since 1924 has been under intense back-bench pressure to abolish fox-hunting, which tells us that it has little to do with

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foxes. When, in July 2003, Labour back-bench M.P.s voted for a total ban, many made no secret of the fact that they saw it as an act of revenge on upper-class toffs for Mrs. Thatcher's destruction of the coal-mining industry: "That's for the miners!" some exclaimed on entering the voting lobby. So what does this tell us?

It tells us that the key to understanding leadership in Britain from Churchill to Blair remains constant, because the fault lines of British society remain constant, even if the superficialities change and soften. Class is the key; and the manner in which any politician relates to this constant determines the difference between success and failure, more than any other political variable over the century.

Mrs. Thatcher's success was that she was herself a living embodiment of the key feature in her political program. She was a lower-middle-class woman, daughter of a grocer in Grantham, who improved herself. She won the working-class vote and the vote of the aspirant *petite bourgeoisie* with a program of self-advancement: *enrichissez-vous!* Furthermore, she ran a cabinet of toffs with conspicuous success. Dennis Healey, ever one of the Labour Party's most coruscating social observers, remarked that Mrs. Thatcher was so successful in disciplining her cabinets of upper-middle and upper-class men because she reminded them of Nanny.

But it was the runaway success of Mrs. Thatcher's selling-off of public assets (for example, council houses) that sealed her electoral popularity. Working-class women, especially, took the lead in voting Tory for the first time in large numbers. It gave birth to the worldwide revolution of so-called privatization, marking a turning point in the post-war era. In many ways, it was the beginning of the end of the national government consensus of the wartime years under Churchill–Attlee.

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So, the benchmark for the success of leaders is cruel and simple. Who is comfortable with England (not Britain) in all its humane eccentricity, and who is not? In each case, the uncomfortable leaders have expressed their discomfort through support for the same policy.

Churchill was an aristocrat with a common touch. Throughout his whole life, from the time when he nearly lost it as a young man in the Boer War to his opposition at the Attlee Labour government's accelerated decolonisation of India and

Pakistan, he defined his England in terms of its imperial destiny and, presciently, the global role of the English-speaking peoples. As to Britain's relationship with the continent, his position was no different from that of the Duke of Wellington; Britain was "with but not of" continental Europe. Churchill was a supporter of any moves among the continental European powers to unify themselves in the aftermath of Nazi occupation, but, as one of the Big Three, Britain, in his view, had no interest or part as a participant party in moves among a group of countries with a far more fragile and less successful history of democracy than its own.

In his later years, Attlee delighted in his honors and ennoblement, and welcomed becoming a respected part of the British establishment. Therefore, to the Labour Party fundamentalists, he was a class traitor like Ramsay Macdonald, or Sir Hartley Shawcross (known to them by his nickname of "Sir Shortly Floorcross" to explain his move from Left to Right). But Attlee was forgiven because he had presided over the government of nationalization and especially—totemically for the Labour Party—nationalization of the provision of health care. "Ramsay McBlair" is the worst calumny that can be summonsed up from the vaults of Labour demonology to castigate the present leader by his own Socialist backbenchers—his most devoted enemies.

Like Mrs. Thatcher, Edward Heath was also of lower-middle-class origin, but, unlike her, was always uncomfortable and on edge in his relationship with a Conservative Party that he felt had never really properly accepted him. She suc-

ceeded spectacularly where he so conspicuously failed. He was defeated by organised trade union power; she smashed it. Heath sublimated his discomfort into a near fanatical enthusiasm for the European Project, which became the single most consistent feature of his political life. Support for British entry into a federal European Project was an aspect of his first election address as a prospective parliamentary candidate in 1950. He became the prime minister who eventually took Britain into the European Project—the very thing that Churchill did not conceive to be possible. It is plain from Heath's later writings and interviews that he understood entirely, but chose not to publicize, the subversive political agenda that lay within what he presented to the British electorate as an entirely economic matter of entering a "common market."

What then of Blair? As a cultural and social conservative leading a formation uncertainly grafted onto a Labour party, logically, perhaps, Tony Blair seems to epitomize membership of what the sociologist A.H. Halsey described as "the class of low classness."⁵ He is of the class that defines itself by declining to discuss England in class terms. His accent is famously fungible, taking on the inflections of those with whom he is talking: Estuary English in Essex; the Queen's English in Westminster. But Blair's Jacobinism is now revealed.

It would appear that he deeply dislikes England. His political rhetoric is framed as a mission for "modernization" and "reform"—self-evidently virtuous things, labels that are attached to every one of his initiatives, starting with his promotion of the disastrous Millennium Dome project (the running of which he gave to Mandelson): a symbol, he hoped, of "Cool Britannia." He has no time for the quirks of England's electoral or legal eccentricities and greatly admires, in almost messianic degree, the French-conceived European Project into which, like Heath before him, he would be prepared to lead England at almost any cost. Blair's enthusiasm to submerge, and thus abolish, England in a federal Europe is linked to his greatest domestic legacy.

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Alongside his brave and just wars in defense of human rights—six in seven years in office—the Blair government (which means, in practice, Blair and his very small group of informal advisers—for, as the evidence of the Hutton Inquiry revealed, there is nothing more democratic about this revolutionary clique than there was about the Committee of Public Safety in an earlier Jacobin era) has pursued an unannounced program of constitutional sabotage on a scale that has not been seen in England since the time of Oliver Cromwell and the Civil War. The term "sabotage" is used advisedly, and it has several dimensions.

First, and earliest to appear, was the promotion of "devolution." This was a decidedly smelly deal with the machine politicians of the Scottish Labour Party,

which entrenched their own fiefdom and indeed gave them their own castle. The new Scottish Assembly Building at Holyrood is now the subject of a public inquiry, its cost having rocketed from between £10 and 40 million to—mind-bogglingly, scandalously—£431 million, acquiring the sarcastic nick-name “Follyrood” in the process. At the same time, the devolution has failed to answer what the Father of the House, Tam Dalyell, has immortalised as “the West Lothian question:” why under these arrangements should Scottish politicians in Westminster be allowed to continue to vote on issues affecting only England? The votes of the Scottish Labour politicians at Westminster were instrumental in saving Blair from defeat on two of his flagship bills: pyrrhic victories intended (but failing) to chip away at the foundations of the last two remaining redoubts of state socialism in education and in the national health service.

Linked to devolution is a comprehensive program for the destruction of the centuries-old traditions of local government. In particular, the shire counties—the county councils—are to be replaced by a new bureaucracy. The project is particularly that of John Prescott, the “deputy prime minister,” and takes the form of the introduction of a *directoire* of government offices for the regions to fit the continental model of regional governments (*départements*). The destruction of county councils and Prescott’s local government changes would also have the electorally-beneficial effect of gerrymandering against the conservative power base in rural areas, thus complementing the stealthy gerrymandering of national constituencies, which now set a consistently higher required minimum number of voters to elect a Conservative than a Labour MP.

A third feature of the constitutional project has been an enormous proliferation of quasi-governmental organizations, committees with executive powers that are stuffed through a massive exercise in political patronage. These include the management boards for local hospitals and all manner of supervisory and regulatory bodies, which have been part of the 50 percent expansion in tax-funded government activities since 1997.

The abolition of the Lord Chancellorship, already mentioned above, makes no sense in its own terms. The system of the Lord Chancellorship and of the law lords works, but in a peculiarly English way, like the common law. And that is the point of that. Creation of a Department of Constitutional Affairs—a title with a curiously Orwellian ring about it—moves Britain more towards the continental norm of ministries of justice and, were it to happen, makes Britain’s participation in European federal activities under an ever-widening legal *acquis* easier to contemplate.

However, the central element of this comprehensive constitutional sabotage is found where we started, in Gilbert and Sullivan’s light operetta. It has been the butchering of the House of Lords. Abolition of hereditary peers and a steadfast refusal to contemplate what they themselves demanded, namely, the creation

of a properly legitimate and fully-elected Second Chamber to give a different but continuing counterweight to the House of Commons, effectively destroys the internal balance of the unwritten British constitution.

Blackstone eloquently described it in his *Commentary on the Laws of England*. There have only ever been three sorts of government of which we know since ancient times, he wrote: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Monarchy has the virtue of firm and swift action, but the disadvantage of potential tyranny. Aristocracy has the virtue of reflection and long-sightedness, but the disadvantage of lacking popular mandate. And democracy has the advantage of popular mandate, but the disadvantage of febrile and often silly enthusiasms. The English constitution consists of three elements. All Acts of Parliament reflect this in their preamble: The Crown acts "...upon the advice and with the consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and of the Commons." Put the three together, Blackstone wrote, and England is furnished with an informal but—by that token—robust and self-balancing unwritten constitution. Upset any one of these elements, he continued, and the entire constitutional settlement will quickly be unpicked and will collapse.⁶

The ambitious and totally unannounced agenda for constitutional uproar has marched in harmony with the Blair government's attempted imposition of all three key elements of the accelerated federal European Project. Namely, subordination of the independent foreign policy and armed forces of the nation within some "European" whole; irrevocable sinking of the independent currency within the project of the "euro" federal currency; and, latterly, subscription to the botched federal constitution drafted by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing with the assistance of a secretariat led by the British diplomat Sir John Kerr, who claim now in public statements not to recognize the driving intention of their own work.

In fact Sir John asserts that the general effect is just the opposite of what the specific clauses say: a selection of some will serve to permit the reader to form a view. Article 6 creates a legal personality for the EU so that it can act like a state; Article 10 gives primacy to EU law over those of member states; Article 17, the Flexibility Article, permits the Commission to take new powers without basis in inter-governmental treaty. Furthermore this Constitution repeals the Treaty of Rome and thus removes its unanimity requirement; especially Article 24(4)—the Passerelle Article of Maoist permanent revolution—allows new areas to be moved from unanimous to qualified majority voting, thus defeating national veto, on governmental assent merely, without reference to the national legislatures whose castration is plainly the drafters' object. Sir John has overseen the drafting of powers to give the EU a route to autonomous tax raising competence (Article III-62) and to give "Union" control of energy resources (Article III-157)—i.e. British oil which comprises 90 percent of reserves. And the draft constitution conspicuously lacks one Article in its Byzantine many: an Article that gives a way to return

powers from the *acquis communautaire* to the nation-states. There is only a forward gear to engage: there is no Plan B. And in the key specific area of the Common Security and Defence Policy, Article 40(6) of the proposed constitution facilitates so-called structured cooperation, a euphemism to describe a way in which a minority of members of the Project (France and friends) could form their own policies in these areas and then have the veto over which countries not part of that pioneer group would later be able to join, while another clause imposes a duty of “loyalty” to “Union” policy.

It looks like a duck; it walks like a duck; it quacks like a duck. What is it? To inquiry as to what all this means, if it does not mean what it means on the page as you read it, it is genially asserted that the federal (Monnet) project is dead. This reply is not, however, without precedent; rather the opposite. British officials and politicians who have entered and been possessed by Brussels have consistently said that white is black until it becomes clear that black is black, at which point the public is told to lump it. We may presume that Mr. Blair approved of Sir John’s labors because in May 2004 he became one of the Prime Minister’s two personal nominees for elevation to the Peerage.

The soon-to-be Lord Kerr’s interpretation is, however, not the view of Blair’s own most senior Parliamentary representative in the process. Gisela Stuart is a Labour M.P. of German birth who was appointed as the British member of the presidium of Giscard’s drafting committee. In the days before the failure of the Brussels summit, Stuart published an explosive Fabian pamphlet, which exposed in detail both the federal agenda—some of which I have briefly rehearsed above—and, in equally racy detail, the extraordinary mixture of deceitful and bullying tactics of Giscard d’Estaing and his associates as they sought to ram through a document that in the end, Stuart—a previously committed enthusiast and indeed living proof of the reality of European integration—came to believe could never be in the British national interest.⁷ She saw the entire conception as anachronistic: decades out-of-date.

The differences between the views of the bureaucrat and the legislator would be only of academic interest if the whole bloated business of the Giscardian constitution had landed firmly in the trash can, as *The Economist* advocated in an issue with a picture of an overflowing trash can on the cover. “The convention did not even try to write a lasting constitutional settlement,” the newspaper fulminated. “It has written the opposite: in effect a blueprint for accelerated instability.”⁸ The thing did, indeed, collapse in the face of Spanish and Polish refusal to surrender voting weight at the Brussels Summit of December 2003, to the barely disguised relief of most leaders. But now al-Qaeda has bombed the Constitution back onto the agenda. The 3/11 Madrid bombers bombed the Aznar government out of office and bombed Zapatero’s Spanish Socialists in: of this there can be no doubt at all, nor, in my view, of its utterly

ominous implication for continental European democracy. Zapatero speedily gave up the signed and sealed deal obtained in the Nice Treaty by his predecessor; Poland could not stand alone; and thus the Giscard/Kerr Constitution comes back from the grave. And now, to all of this disembowelling of the English constitutional settlement, the Blair government is prepared to give assent. His senior representative, Ms. Stuart had called for the issue to be put to a referendum, and the chorus of demand became irresistible. As this essay goes to press, Blair has reversed his previously adamant refusal. But he has set neither the question nor the date. Part of this calculation is probably the hope that, as is thought likely, at least one of the other countries scheduled to hold referenda will kill the constitution before the British electorate does. So despite the reprieve created by al-Qaeda, it is decreasingly likely that any of this will now happen as the "European union" quickly crumbles, not least under the influence of enlargement to embrace eastern Europeans.

But it is not only the European Union that passed a tipping point in the period 2002–2004; the Blair government did as well. The precise moment was the July day on which the body of Dr. David Kelly, Britain's leading expert on biological weapons, was found after his apparent suicide, which led to one of the most remarkable investigations of contemporary political behavior under the chairmanship of Lord Hutton. The investigative process, which Hutton initiated, laid extensive detailed information about the precise workings of the inner group of Jacobins running the "New Labour Project" before an astonished and interested public. It showed a degree of informality coupled with arrogance and self-assurance that touched a public nerve. When in the end the judge issued a report that exonerated the government of wrong doing, the exoneration was too complete and comprehensive to be convincing. But that was not the point of the Hutton episode. At that moment, Hugo Young's predictions from the day after the election of 1997 ominously returned, for confidence in the probity and simple trustworthiness of the Blair government rapidly trickled away.

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By the end of Lord Hutton's inquiry (but before the issuing of his report) it was already clear that, subject to one other set of developments shortly to occur, the common-place about the role of the Labour Party in British politics was about to be reconfirmed. The missing development related to the third common-place about British twentieth century political parties. This states that one should not underestimate the will for survival of the Conservative Party.

Following the ejection of Mrs. Thatcher, the Conservative Party entered a

long period of internecine warfare and behavior that can best be understood if the removal of Thatcher is perceived as an act of political matricide followed then by a long period of repentance. During those 12 years, the party successively elected three differently inadequate men, the second of whom (Hague) devised rules for the election of leaders of the Conservative Party intended to deprive the Parliamentary Conservative Party of future choice of its leader. That formula, put into effect after Hague's defeat in the general election (which gave way to the second Blair administration), led inexorably to a choice that left the party politically paralyzed. During the last months of Mr. Duncan-Smith's tenure as leader of the Conservative Party, it looked as if the common-place about the party of Wellington and Peel was about to be disproved. But then, in the course of a single weekend, the Conservative Party administered electro-convulsive shock therapy to itself and returned from the edge of death.

On the one hand, by having no competition for Duncan-Smith's successor, it threw off the self-mutilating electoral rules for leaders designed by Hague. Instead of tearing itself apart, to its own surprise, the Conservative Party crowned the most credible of all the possible candidates, available only because Hague had reportedly reneged on an agreement to support him at the time of Hague's succession to Major. Had Hague kept his word, Michael Howard would have been the night-watchman leader instead of him. But instead Hague put himself forward and politically self-destructed.

Michael Howard is an example of the only other type of leader than one at ease with England who can flourish in the class-framed context of British society. The son of immigrants, a practicing Jew married to an English rose, he is someone who has won through in the face of the sotto voce anti-Semitism, which denied him a parliamentary seat for many years. He is thus politically a self-made man and an echo of the last time that the Conservatives were in such desperate straits and were rescued by a (Christianized) Jew—Benjamin Disraeli. Howard is supported by another boundary man, another child of the diaspora, in his shadow chancellor Oliver Letwin; and they in turn will be joined after the next election by a former foreign and defense minister, a third Jew, Malcolm Rifkind, who has just been selected for a safe seat and may be expected swiftly to return to the Front Bench.

The question of the next year will be to see whether, in counter-point with the invariably polite, probing, and (for New Labour) disconcerting rhetoric of the shadow chancellor, Howard can create a new language of British politics that will successfully neutralise and dislodge the "attack" politics of the years of spin. The seriousness of the threat to New Labour was registered by the simple fact that Chancellor Gordon Brown devoted the entire thrust of his 2004 budget to attacking it. The scale of this challenge was brutally etched by Gordon Brown's snatch-and-grab attack on Letwin's economic proposals, which he simultaneously scorned

and appropriated. As noteworthy was the cynical public reaction shown in opinion polling. The public understood that Brown (like George Bush) was fire-hosing public money by increasing borrowings, which would inevitably mean tax increases if the tactic won the next election, but they didn't seem surprised or to care, much. So the Conservatives will need to raise their game to deal with Brown's leadership bid to supplant Blair (for such this plainly is). But Howard's opportunity has a deeper, more structural aspect that is also Mrs. Thatcher's creation, paradoxically; for his opportunity comes from the manner in which Blair's tenure is unravelling. It is doing so in ways that may deprive Brown of his turn in Number Ten altogether, or may curtail his tenure.

Assisted by the ideologically-blinkered foolishness of its leadership, with cold-eyed planning and precision, Mrs. Thatcher successfully destroyed the power base of organized labor in the miners' strike, and not only in the coal mining industry but by extension in many other areas thereafter. What she did not do was to destroy the Labour Party. She did, however, unwittingly create the context in which that destruction would occur. For the irony of Blair's leadership is that, whereas he was indispensable to the presentational device that enabled Labour to win in 1997, he would also, by his conduct in office, guarantee schism. Some old-time socialists detest him enough that they would evidently prefer to return to the ideological purity of permanent opposition. Few, if any, commentators expect that the Labour Party can ever win again with the margins of the last two elections. And the Labour M.P.s most vulnerable to losing their seats are the "Blairites." The likelihood is that, even if he is returned to power again, Blair will return with a smaller majority and a majority consisting of that part of the Labour Party that is implacably opposed to him across the board. That is, those who oppose him on his attempted reforms of the public services and who are root and branch opposed to his foreign policy, most particularly in Iraq. These are the same people who admire the emotionally self-indulgent betrayal of confidences received while a junior-ranking Minister, done in the interests of damaging Blair, by Clare Short.

For the "New Labour Project's" calculation to have succeeded, the fury of the Left could be ignored if another great gamble had come off. But it has not. This is the gamble that, by increasing public revenue through a range of taxes other than progressive income tax and then spraying this money upon the public services, "delivery," particularly in health and education, would be improved and the electorate would be appropriately grateful. It has not happened. For two years, money has flooded into the Health Service, but "finished consultant episodes"—the measure of output—have fallen. In secondary education, examination grade inflation means that everyone wins prizes, but basic competence in life skills (math, grammar, etc.) continues to erode, as every university teacher knows. Why? The gamble was predicated upon a false premise, which is that

money is the problem. Money alone—especially soaked up in a spawning biota of assessment and appraisal bureaucracies that cause a rash of targetitis worthy of the former Soviet Gosplan—does not do the trick.

In the last two remaining areas of British society still locked into the mid-twentieth century command economy model of socialist planning—namely education and health—there are signs that the public mood is turning. It no longer believes that governments are appropriate agents to manage large enterprises such as these, and in

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this it is clear that the British electorate has decisively embraced a low-tax, post-socialist model of society that is quite alien, indeed baffling, to the last remaining class warriors on Mr. Blair's back benches. What remains to be seen is whether Michael Howard and Oliver Letwin are capable not only of framing a new conversation with the electorate, but of doing so in terms that will resonate with a political agenda that seeks simultaneously lower taxes, more choice, and superior provision of public services in a mixed market. As the pre-emptive

attack of Brown's Budget showed, that cannot be done timidly.

Perhaps the most telling signs of what may be coming to western Europe are to be found in the east, in the unexpected success of the Estonian decision to bet on the Laffer Curve, and to abandon progressive income tax in favour of flat-rate taxation. The move has been copied elsewhere in eastern Europe and is spreading rapidly. The moment to watch for will be when the first western European state follows suite. But in the British case, for any of the Howard era Conservatives' ambitions to succeed, it will be important first to see whether the special and eccentric nature of the English constitutional settlement can be rescued from the prolonged attack upon it, which was initiated by Heath and amplified by Blair, in both cases as aspects of their evident discomfort with the nature of an England which they would prefer to abolish than to serve. ■

NOTES

1 The Profumo Scandal (1963) led to the resignation of the Minister of War when it emerged that he had been sharing a call girl with the Soviet naval attaché.

2 For the full speech, see British Politics Pages at <<http://www.ukpolitics.org.uk/cgi/viewnews.cgi?id=1012823759>> (accessed May 13, 2004).

3 Hugo Young, "The People's Victory," *The Guardian*, May 2, 1997, 21.

4 As reported by Nicholas Watt in "'Sieve the Moment' Rallying cry to anti-hunting MPs", *The Guardian*, July 1, 2003 <<http://guardian.co.uk/guardianpolitics/story/0%2C3605%2C988540%2C00.html>> (accessed May 13, 2004).

5 A. H. Halsey, *Change in British Society*, 2nd Edition (New York: OPUS, 1986).

6 William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: In Four Books*, 3rd Edition (New York: Lawbook Exchange, Limited, 2003).

7 Gisela Stuart, *The Making of Europe's Constitution*, Fabian Ideas Series, The Fabian Society, December 2003.

8 "Where to File Europe's New Constitution," *The Economist*, June 21-27, 2003, 367 (8329), 9.
