
BRITISH POLITICAL LEADERSHIP FROM CHURCHILL TO BLAIR: In Churchill's Footsteps: How Blair Bombed Out

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There is an old-fashioned view that a debate should attempt to have a beginning, a middle, and an end—and preferably in that order. I find that view both appealing and relevant since I have a strong suspicion that, no matter how hard we try to avoid it, the final resting place of our discussion today is preordained. That place is Iraq. But before we disappear into the mists and mirages of the deserts around Baghdad, let us begin by bending our knee to the formal subject of this debate, which is the quality of leadership.

First, we need a definition. What is political leadership? It's not the same as simply being a leader, a matter of occupying office. Ten men and one woman have sat in that famous chair before the fireplace in 10 Downing Street since the time of Churchill, yet today the majority of them lie buried in unmarked graves. Their greatest political success often is their arrival at Downing Street; most of them have left with heads low and sometimes in tears, their reputations either greatly diminished or in tatters. Furthermore, the quality of leadership should not be confused with the ability to win elections or to cling to office. Harold Wilson won three elections during this period, but was not great, while John Major survived for seven years, leaving most people to wonder how.

So let me offer a starting point for the discussion by suggesting that political leadership is about change and movement. Leadership requires the creation of a new and purposeful political direction. It also requires that direction to be clearly discernible long after the events creating it have taken place.

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The movement must be forward, which raises the question of whether Britain has seen any leadership at all. After all, at the end of the 1930s Britain was still the center of a global empire, it was the world's cultural leader, and still its second-most powerful economy. Today, it is none of those things. Clearly there has been massive change, but not much of it has seemed entirely purposeful or positive.

Yet let us not wallow in cynicism. After all, Britain has never been more than a relatively small offshore island. It was never an option to hold on to the hegemony of its imperial years, and those prime ministers who tried (like Anthony Eden during the Suez War) ended up buried in the farthest corner of the graveyard. Things inevitably change, but the question is, has that change been directed and has it been positive?

Allow me to pluck four names from our list of 11 to be considered for the accolade of leadership. My first choice is Clement Attlee, an ardent Socialist who was prime minister from 1945-1951, and I nominate him even though I have spent much of my life helping fight the forces of Socialism. Yet Attlee undoubtedly had both vision and principle. He was a modest man and one who, so Winston Churchill claimed, had much to be modest about. Yet this modest man showed remarkable qualities of leadership on many fronts. He was the prime minister who took the historic step of publicly signalling the end of the British Empire by granting independence to India in 1947. With a stroke of the pen, hundreds of millions of souls on the subcontinent were freed from the imperial yoke and allowed to chart their own course. It was a development that would soon be mirrored elsewhere and would transform the map of the world. Of course decolonization was inevitable, but Attlee claims the credit for initiating the process and embracing it not simply out of necessity but from deeply held conviction.

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This modest man also showed remarkable leadership on the domestic front. Britain in the late 1930s had been corrupt and rotten to her core—economically, socially, and politically. She was a country characterized by desperate inequalities and injustices. During the years of economic depression and the rise of the European dictatorships, her leaders had displayed neither foresight nor courage. In 1945, at the first opportunity after the war, the people demanded that the entire system be swept away.

Attlee's response was a program of social welfare and economic reorganization that was little short of revolutionary. He grabbed into state ownership the commanding heights of the economy—steel, coal, railways, gas, electricity, the Bank of England, civil aviation, telephone services—and he also nationalized the health service. He believed in state control and exercised it to the hilt. Attlee's

government undertook a massive program of change that was both fundamental and historic. He turned Britain into the post-imperial wind and sent her in an entirely new direction.

Yet it is said that all political careers end in failure, and in his attempt to clean out the stables Attlee created new injustices and inequalities—between the state and the individual, between organized labor and ordinary workers, and between state-owned industries and consumers. The Attlee era was not to last, and after six years he and his government were swept from power, but the challenges he set out were to continue to dominate political debate in Britain for the next 40 years.

We move on quickly, for not a lot happened in Britain for the next 25 years—apart from England winning the World Cup, a triumph it owed not only to its players but to a classic mistake by a Russian linesman. Britannia continued to lose her empire and her way in the world.

The lack of leadership eventually grew to be desperately dangerous. It left a vacuum that came to be filled by industrial militants and political Marxists—small and unrepresentative cliques who were nevertheless able to take advantage of the decaying British system. When I was working as a news editor on the Boston Globe during 1973, I remember being handed a contribution by an academic who suggested that Britain might wake up one morning to discover there had been a quiet Marxist coup.

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Extremists had infiltrated every type of institution—the Labour Party, the trade unions, the civil service, and the education system. The institution of parliamentary democracy itself seemed to be under direct threat. Elected governments were destroyed by massive confrontations with militant trade unionists—Wilson in 1970, Heath in 1974, and Callaghan in 1979. Policy was decided on the picket lines, not in Parliament. It was a period of increasing madness that culminated in what became known as the Winter of Discontent when everything seemed to stop. Schools were closed, ambulances were turned away from hospitals, food ran short, power supplies were cut, and cemeteries were locked. Even the dead couldn't escape.

Far from an academic exercise in the theoretically possible, all this happened, in reality, and much more. It was hell.

Yet during this time another classic mistake occurred, and one that was to prove of far greater consequence than that of the Russian linesman in 1966. In 1975 the country sat stunned after a housewife from Finchley, Margaret Thatcher, was elected as leader of the Conservative Party. Indeed, the Conservative Party stunned itself, because it hadn't intended to do much more than to nail the feet of the incumbent leader, Ted Heath, to the floor; instead,

they found the wrong part of his anatomy and he was gone. They woke up to discover that Mrs. T, she of the appalling hair and even less appealing voice, had taken over the oldest boys' club in Westminster.

Few Conservative leaders had come to that office with lower expectations of success. She seemed out of place, out of time, and she was a woman. A few years of failure with her, it was thought, and then the Conservative Party could get back to its proper business.

Let me for a moment return to our definition of leadership. The operative words are movement, purposeful change, and a direction that is clearly discernible long after the events that created it have taken place. Britain in the late 1970s was on the point of collapse. It was commonly described as "the sick man of Europe." Commentators talked of the possibility of a quiet Marxist takeover. Britain was imploding with impotence.

Yet by 1990, when at last they threw her out, the Britain of Margaret Thatcher was a very different place. Indeed it had changed, and been changed, almost beyond recognition. The power of the trade unions was crushed—I use the term deliberately—in a series of brutal confrontations. The monopolistic powers of the nationalized industries were broken up, and soon you could get a telephone installed in days and not months, no matter what color you wanted. The ambitions of the European federalists were confronted, as were General Galtieri and his troops after they had invaded the Falkland Islands. The voice of Britain began to be listened to once again, perhaps no more so than by Ronald Reagan who, with Margaret Thatcher at his side, presided over the collapse of Communism and the end of the Cold War. The Finchley housewife was transformed into the Iron Maiden, and foreign leaders no longer sniggered.

I was part of her close personal staff for much of this time. I didn't like her (heavens, she could be appalling) but I couldn't fail to respect her, and I knew I was witnessing, and even playing a part in, a crucial period of historic change, both domestically and on the international scene. She did more than rearrange the deckchairs; she changed the direction of the ship and steered it away from calamity.

There were many casualties during this process, of course. But compare Britain in 1979 with the country as she left it in 1990. The impact of Thatcherism was as clear as, and even more powerful than, Clement Attlee's Socialism.

However, she did not succeed in all her objectives. She proclaimed her intention to kill off the Labour Party. She didn't, which brings me to Tony Blair.

This is the most difficult part of the debate, for we are dealing with living history. We have to try to detach ourselves from the arguments and emotions of the day. I predict with considerable confidence that we shall fail. But let us struggle to imagine the situation in which we would find ourselves if Mr. Blair fell under the proverbial Clapham omnibus this afternoon. Let's try to cut through the hype-spin-bull and ask ourselves: What will he be remembered for?

I suggest that historians would fix upon two of Blair's international achievements. The first would be Iraq and the second would be what he has done to ensure that Britain remains a bridge between Europe and America. (He has also sneaked Britain towards greater involvement in the experiment to create a political union in Europe, but the results are inconclusive and the gratitude of either history or the British electorate is far from certain.)

We'll return to the international front in a moment, but first let me canter around the domestic field. It will be a brief exercise. After almost seven years in office, what does Blairism mean? It seems to me that Socialism and Thatcherism are solid enough bodies of prejudices and principles, the sort of things you can kick. But Blairism?

He has tried to set his own individual stamp on proceedings. He renamed the party as New Labour and tried to promote a movement that he called the Third Way. Yet after nearly two terms of office it has no clear definition and no clearly discernible direction. History will not identify the Blair years with any lucid ideological or philosophical framework. Indeed, a recent academic survey suggests that Britain has become even more Thatcherite in its attitudes under Tony Blair, less trusting of government, and more keen on individual responsibility. Domestically, Blair is something of a philosophical blur.

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Perhaps that doesn't matter, for it will be in the field of foreign affairs that the judgment of history will be hung upon Mr. Blair, and it probably won't look much further than Iraq. At this point, I should emphasize that I don't see the positions of Mr. Blair and Mr. Bush as being identical. They offered different reasons for intervening in Iraq, and it is intent as much as action that should be our yardstick.

Before the war started, Tony Blair emphasized (in contrast to President Bush, perhaps) that it was not about regime change. War was a response to a clear and imminent threat to British interests. This threat focused most prominently on weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and to that danger was added an echo of the claim that Iraq actively supported terrorism. It was on that basis that the British government argued that intervention would be legal, and, in the early days of the debate, Mr. Blair insisted that his position would be backed by United Nations resolutions. He maintained that there were "thousands of weapons sites" in Iraq, that intelligence suggested the WMD could be prepared for action in 45 minutes, and that Iraq also had an active nuclear program.¹

Yet it seems that we are more likely to find life on Mars than WMD in the Iraqi desert. The 45-minute claim was given huge prominence in Britain, yet Mr. Blair now insists that he did not realize his claim referred only to tactical

battlefield weapons and not to strategic long-range systems, and he did not ask for clarification or further details. In any event, the intelligence was hopelessly wrong—and so was his military justification for the war.

His legal justification is also shrouded in mystery. The British government now argues, in apparent clear contradiction to its earlier statements, that it did not need further UN resolutions to justify the war, and that there were other grounds for considering the intervention to be legal. Yet it steadfastly refuses to publish the advice it received from its own legal officer about the legal basis for war.

The best that can be said about his revamped political justification—that getting rid of Saddam would reduce the threat of terrorism and bring stability to the region—is that it is unproven, even more so after the bombings in Madrid.

So what has Mr. Blair helped do to our international system? Does it have a clearer set of legal principles to moderate relations between nations? Is our prime international organization, the UN, stronger and more effective as a result? Have precedents been set that will become effective against other tyrants, or was this a one-off intervention? Will the Anglo-American policing role be extended around the world (or merely into oilfields and other places of special interest)? In short, is our world now a safer place, one that is run along more stable lines than before?

These, I believe, will be the issues on which Mr. Blair's claim to leadership will be judged. Clearly as a result of the war there has been change and movement, and a huge amount of it. But if it is to be regarded as the stuff of leader-

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ship, the new direction he has set has to be both purposeful and positive—and it seems to me that it is not. Blair's thinking has been partial and woolly, his arguments incomplete and often contradictory, and the international environment he has helped create is covered in more confusion than clarity.

Of course, the passage of time may help clear the mists and in hindsight the new Bush-Blair world system might yet come to be bathed in sunlight. But I wouldn't put a penny on it.

All of which brings me to my fourth candidate for leadership. Winston Churchill's career was so immense and well recorded that there seems little need to remind you of it in any great detail, but I would like to offer a couple of reflections that help illustrate some of the qualities of leadership.

The first is the element of luck. Churchill's great years came only after decades of failure. Indeed, in the spring of 1939, just months before the outbreak of World War II, Churchill's general reputation was as a man who was old, unreliable, unprincipled, and something of a drunk. The Conservative Party was actively trying to deselect him from his parliamentary seat with the intention of having him thrown out of the House of Commons. Anyone asking at that time if Winston was

a Great Leader would have been sent for some form of medical examination.

He became prime minister on May 10, 1940, by accident and not by election. Two days earlier, the government of Neville Chamberlain had collapsed, and early that morning Adolf Hitler had launched his forces upon their invasion of France, Belgium, and Holland. A new prime minister was required. The King, Conservative Party, Chamberlain himself, and most of the press wanted the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, for the job, but Halifax had other ideas. He said he had a stomach ache, and declined. The establishment, confused and in a state of mild terror, turned in panic to Churchill.

On many occasions during the next two years Britain came within days, even hours, of losing the war. Had it not been for Churchill, that would have happened. Yet Churchill's greatness lay in more than heroic defiance; it is also to be found in his understanding of the magnitude of the task that lay ahead of him.

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He knew that huge change was inevitable, much of it not to his own personal liking. He understood the war would destroy old Britain and its empire. Europe would be rebuilt and dragged in one of three alternative directions—Nazism under the domination of Hitler, Communism under the domination of Stalin, or Democracy under the leadership of the United States. The choice between these alternatives was not always unanimous; there were many in Britain who would have been content to allow Hitler to dominate in Europe if it could have brought an end to the war. To Churchill the Imperialist, the U.S. alternative was not without its own perils and hardships, but it was a choice he embraced and from which he never wavered. He badgered, browbeat, bribed, and begged a reluctant United States to join the war—and, with a little help from the Japanese, he eventually succeeded. So let me leap over some of the most tempestuous years in our history and state that, as a result of Churchill's actions and inspirations, the Western world was set upon an entirely new course. The world as we know it today owes as much to him as it does to any man. Change, yes; movement, masses of it; and a purposeful new direction. Churchill's claim to leadership is clear and paramount among British prime ministers.

He also offered one very modern lesson to war leaders. When he came to office, Churchill knew that he could only rise to the challenges that lay ahead if he had the understanding of the people. Their trust would be crucial. Yet they were scarcely in any mood to trust politicians in May 1940; the people had been misled and deceived so many times.

Churchill gambled. He believed the people would not give him their trust unless he was able to show that he trusted them. So, within days of taking office, he went before the country and treated them to an analysis of almost brutal honesty. In

his first speech as prime minister, he said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat." So they rallied to him, and continued to support him through the terrible days that were to come.

Even through the stretching times of war, honesty can be the best policy. It is a lesson that today's war leaders would do well to heed.

Of course, it ended in tears. Churchill understood that the prewar establishment in Britain had failed and would be comprehensively destroyed; he also had a shrewd suspicion that he would be identified with that establishment and would suffer along with it. I think he once observed that the British in adversity were magnificent and in triumph were intolerable. In 1945, at the first opportunity, they hurled him from office. They knew he was never going to be the social reformer on the domestic front that they then demanded.

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Yet it was Churchill who enabled it all to happen, who allowed the modern Britain to be forged from the furnace of war. Little wonder that in a recent BBC poll he was voted the Greatest Briton, and by a huge margin.²

So let me reach a conclusion. Britain has frequently punched above its weight, and her voice has often proved stronger than her muscle. No other country of a similar size has had as much impact over these past 60-odd years. The old girl has displayed plenty of leadership.

Yet leadership is not a comfortable condition. There is one common characteristic of British leaders during this time, whether they showed competence or total ineptitude, and that is that almost every one of those 11 prime ministers were hacked, stabbed, pushed, or dragged to their political graves—even Winston Churchill in 1945. British leaders, no matter how great, never know when to go gracefully.

Towards the end of his career, Churchill went one evening into the medieval Guildhall in the City of London with Lady Astor at his side. Although they were members of the same party, they had spent their political lives scratching at each other like cat and dog.

As they entered, Lady Astor said, "Look around you, Winston. You could fill half of Guildhall with all the brandy that you've drunk in your life."

The old man gazed around the vast oak-beamed hall and nodded. "There is so much left to do, and so little time to do it."

Not a bad moral for anyone interested in leadership. ■

NOTES

1 Tony Blair, House of Commons, September 24, 2002.

2 BBC TV nationwide poll, November 2002.