



Debate

Dr Britain

Tom Nairn

The absent or fog-shrouded hinterland to Tony Blair provides him with a quintessentially 'British' identity, detached from England, Scotland or Wales. He is the vehicle for Labour's transformation, in which Left has become Right. Who else in the ranks of New Labour can 'speak for Britain' in just his easy fashion?

Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
It is not the effort nor the failure tires.
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

It is not your system or clear sight that mills
Down small to the consequence a life requires;
Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.

William Empson, 'Missing dates' (1937) in
Complete Poems (2000)

During the 2001 electoral campaign (as for years before) political journalists puzzled over the personality of Tony Blair. The American observer Joe Klein, for example commented after a day on the campaign trail:

"Blair does have a rather synthetic quality, "A man without a hinterland" Roderick Nye, the policy director for the Tories, says. And there is an indescribable something missing from his public persona...He recently acknowledged enjoying "The Simpsons". But he always leaves one wondering if moments like the "Simpsons" revelation are, somehow, tactical — the latest planned attempt at humanization" (*New Yorker* June 4th 2001).

He compares Blair to President Clinton in this respect. However comparable in policy terms, he says, the two remain oceans apart as public *personae*. On election day itself the *Guardian* published another attempt by Klein at reading the oracle:

“Even now, as he approaches a likely second landslide, no one seems to know how Tony Blair feels as a person or, more to the point, who he is. This is both extraordinary and mystifying. He is about as familiar as a public figure can be. We know that he is religious...But there remains an ineffable something missing. There is an antiseptic, impenetrable, stainless-steel brightness to Blair. There are no rough edges, few edges of any sort ...” (June 7th, G2 section).

These are very perceptive comments, but they may also be out of focus. The absence of a readable ‘hinterland’ and of ‘rough edges’, spontaneity somehow rendered contrived or deliberate, a somewhat super-human demeanour salted by affectations of impulse or immediacy: these are indeed enigmatic as individual traits. However, they are also perfect descriptions of *Britishness*. They seem to delineate a social, collective ethos rather than personal idiosyncracies.

The identity which they replicate is also rather out-dated: a ‘Britishness’ which was, rather than the confusion of the present. But there may be good reasons for this. Like Blair’s increasingly prominent religiosity, it may be felt as a necessary condition of acceptability. After all, we know political parties are among the most conservative of social bodies, and in this case they live in the most profoundly conservative of states. These frameworks compel the present to embody the past — however much ‘radicalism’ is spouted at the same time. Personal rigidity is a possible form of such embodiment.

Imperturbability in command was a celebrated trait of the former ruling class. It was linked to the secondary significance of Nye’s ‘hinterland’. Ruling cadres of course came from somewhere — their own patch of turf, other countries, etc. — but command-structure homogeneity was much more important. There was a *political* sense in which Ellis Wasson’s ‘two thousand five hundred’ of the UK ancien régime came from nowhere — or were located in the same ‘British’ dimension (*Born to Rule: the British Ruling Elite*, 2000). This was one of the secrets of imperial rule (including ‘indirect rule’) and, before that, of the post-1688 archipelago. Tony Blair incarnates a lot of that world-view, but of course does so *also* in the manner of the present: personally, with a measure of off-handedness which always risks appearing contrived or ‘trendy’. Yet that too is inevitable: without it, he would simply look out-dated — straight out of the pre-Thatcher world, as it were.

The effect is indeed that of a magician who has made a compact with a ghost — the haunting presence of a spirit, ‘elusive’ mainly in the sense of significantly detached from interlocutors and the contemporary public. Yet the detachment gives him a certain leverage over his audience. The mixture of phlegm and steeliness which Klein noted creates a space of surmise. Beholders are usually tempted to think that if they behave correctly, then *he* might still produce what they want out of the enigmatic hat. Blair never quite escapes the suspicion of not quite being himself — as distinct from *pretending* to be his own self. But this edgelessness can also be interpreted as a constantly moving promise. Liberal commentators who on the 6th and 7th of June ended up urging readers to vote New Labour after all (‘critically’, in spite of blatant failure, etc.) did so entirely in those terms: ‘*He may yet still...*’ (and so forth).

'Identity' in this sense is a fusion of the personal and the social, which also means 'national'. Nobody ever doubted for a second that Mrs Thatcher or John Major were *English*, however loudly they orated in the name of Britain. Noone would see Gordon Brown as other than *Scottish*, however hard he fights for the Union. The *Welshness* of former party Leader Neil Kinnock was legendary, even although he opposed Welsh devolution as expensive parochialism. But Tony Blair? The absent or fog-shrouded hinterland means that he is somehow just '*British*', or possibly English-British — enough of the former to reassure, but with the emphasis strongly on the latter. This is surely the source of that 'synthetic' dimension Klein identifies.

'Britain' is of course by definition a nationless identity. Different components of it tend to project on to it what they wish or need to see. Immigrants hope 'nationless' means (or can be made to mean) 'multi-national', or 'multi-cultural'. Fascists hope it means 'racial', the figurative common blood of Aryanism. Middle-Englanders trust it will go on just meaning what it used to mean, 'for all practical purposes'. The Scottish, Welsh and Ulster-Unionist servants of synthetic statehood want it to go on including *them* — which it can now do only if everybody is kept in line and forcibly restored to British belief and traditions.

No doubt much in Blair's personal story contributed to today's persona: the Irish, Scottish and North-Eastern background, formation at Fettes Public School, on the 'outer ring' of the old indoctrination system; an ideologically salient environment (Communism to Thatcherism); 'finishing' in Oxford, where with a rock band he underwent a famous *Zeitgeist* moment of adaptation; and then his legal training with Lord Irvine of Lairg. The Prime Minister's parents were unmarried when he was born, and his Scottish surname came from foster parents who temporarily adopted him. His father is Leo Parsons, a Durham lawyer and teacher, much filmed after the 2001 victory. His mother, Hazel Corscaden, was from a family of 'poor Protestant farmers from Donegal' — hence part of a considerable Protestant minority which (mostly) departed after partition. The Irish strand was described in an *Atlantic Monthly* article by Geoffrey Wheatcroft, way back in 1996. Wheatcroft at that time could only speculate that 'the cause of Irish nationalism would get no more of a hearing from a Blair government than from John Major's' — but remember, this was two years before the Belfast Agreement.

However Blair's background should now be deciphered, it is clearly very 'British' in a cross-national sense. But a leadership persona is formed by the synthesis of such factors with institutional constraints — in this case, the ultra-Great-Brit Labour Party, which just as Blair joined up was discovering that it could lose its Socialism a lot easier than its Britishness. It soon needed a figurehead shaped for the latter, and relatively uncontaminated by the former. And in Tony Blair, it found (so to speak) Dr Jekyll without Mr Hyde: a rare hybrid capable of 'fronting' the Movement's transformation into the neo-liberal world bequeathed by Mrs Thatcher.

The factors making Blair ideal for 'New Labour' also help to dispel worry about what he may turn into. After the election, for example, we find one of Scotland's finest political analysts still perplexed by the problem. 'Will the Real Tony Blair Stand Up?' Iain Macwhirter asked in the *Sunday Herald* (June 10th). 'It is strange and a little scary, that we know so little about the Prime Minister', he comments, even after electing him with two landslides:

“In the past, Tony Blair perhaps felt that he had to be all things to all men — and women. That to make Labour electable it had to win *Sun* readers as well as the *Guardian*’s. But after Landslide 2 he has no longer any excuse for ideological evasion ...(and)...can no longer allow his party and personality to look as if they are a media creation. He now has to walk the walk. And this he intends to do.”

Labour is going to get much tougher, he concludes. I’m sure this is right. But I doubt if it will be because the ‘real’ Blair finally emerges. What we have seen so far is what we are likely to get. No alter ego is waiting to pounce. But there *is* a seriously threatened Britishness, which New Labour’s leader is bound to take ‘personally’. Quite apart from the vexing dilemma of the Euro-currency referendum (which will really have to be won *in all four countries* of the U.K.), there is the question of the Barnett Formula and winning the next elections in Scotland and Wales — while keeping the Northern Ireland Agreement alive. All these will require a sustained barrage of no-nonsense Union triumphalism from the Prime Minister and his watchdogs — and notably from the Scottish contingent.

Tony Blair is essentially a vehicle of ‘transformism’ — *trasformismo* as it was once called in Italy, the mechanism of theft and adaptation by which Left becomes Right, or vice-versa, always in the name of the State. No longer possible without devolution, New Labourite transformation demanded in compensation an ultra-British accentuation of the dominant climate, and a corresponding change in popular attitudes — precisely what the aggravated, even hysterical, populism of the first New Labour government has been seeking to achieve. The Greenwich Dome was intended to be a mighty landmark for that direction in affairs — the enduring symbol of a United Kingdom reborn and ready for another century. As the whole world knows, it was a farce. There was nothing — or nothing suitable — to fill it with. Like ‘Britain’, its historic contents and purpose had been lost, and no amount of money and cultural striving could put them back again. So it turned almost at once into a poison sac, an abscess of miserable disputes and corrupt hand-outs which was miraculously kept more or less out of view during the recent electoral campaign. ‘Dr Britain’ was triumphantly reinstalled on a quarter of the votes. Now the poison will have at least four more years, and quite possibly nine or ten, to slowly fill the whole bloodstream of the British state-nation.

In retrospect one may also see the sense of the Blair-Brown conundrum more clearly. Whether or not they arrived at some kind of compact about leadership after John Smith’s death, the choice was never between ‘England’ and Scotland. Labour may indeed have been chary about another Scottish leader, but that quandary was conveniently resolved by Blair’s Britishness. It is doubtful if many wanted an English captain in any emphatic or ethnic sense. Absence of ‘hinterland’ and cloudy religiosity were much safer, and made up for suspicions of shallowness or brashness.

What was safer then is probably even more necessary now. ‘England’ has become more politically salient since 1995, and the Scottish Parliament is likely to challenge the economic basis of the 1998 Scotland Act — the fiscal dependency of the block grant. However, these and other problems seem likely to underwrite Tony Blair’s leadership rather than demolish it. Who else in the ranks of New Labour can ‘speak

for Britain' in just his easy fashion? None of the Westminster Scots, for sure. Soon, they will all be preoccupied with 'saving the Union', a project even more hopeless than the Millenium Dome.

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