

## America's Friend: Reflections on Tony Blair

by  
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The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, may not be an enigmatic figure, but his relationship with President George W. Bush is seemingly one of the great political riddles of our time. To understand it, and the reverence Blair is shown by the Bush administration—so much so that Tory Opposition leader, Michael Howard was recently curtly informed by Karl Rove that his presence would not be welcome in the White House—it is necessary to go to first base. What is it that motivates and informs the Prime Minister, how was he drawn into politics—and more precisely, why did he settle on the Labor Party?

Mr. Blair is the product of an atypical small “c” Conservative family. His father Leo even stood as a Conservative candidate. The young Tony’s right of political passage might, in common with generations of middle class children who found their home in the Labor Party, have been expected to have been defined by rebelliousness and an early attraction to Left wing politics. In fact the young Tony appears to have shown little interest in politics or the Left—he never joined any political party or club at university, instead confined himself to a youthful enthusiasm for Rock, and his band “Ugly Rumours.” While many of his compatriots now in the British Cabinet spent their formative years in the Communist Party, the International Marxist Group, the Socialist Workers Party or Militant, Tony Blair remained the political virgin. That is until he met his wife to be Cherie Booth, who was a young radical lawyer from a Labor supporting family. Blair’s induction into Labor politics was swift, but not deep. His new wife stood as a Labor candidate in the hopeless Tory seat of Thanet in Kent, and perhaps it was her experience that led Tony to stand in an equally hopeless seat in Buckinghamshire.

In 1983, Blair was selected on the casting vote of the local party chairman to stand as the Labor candidate in the rock solid mining seat of Sedgfield in County Durham. Young, protean and eminently presentable, Labor

chieftains helped ensure that this last minute selection before the 1983 General Election produced the nomination for Blair. In 1983, Tony Blair described himself as a supporter of *Tribune*, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Michael Foot. His election manifesto called for Britain to “leave the Common Market” (now the European Union). Once in Parliament, Blair showed the political dexterity that was to propel him to the top of the Labor Party a decade later. He formed an early working and close friendship with the future Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. He still claimed he was a supporter of *Tribune*, but signed up to the Right wing Solidarity Group of Labor MPs (many Solidarity Group MPs whose politics haven’t changed in the intervening decade now see themselves on the Left as the Labor Party has moved steadily to the Right).

Blair’s rise inside the Opposition Labor Party was inexorable. An effective communicator, young and good-looking, he was soon promoted to the Front Bench. His political partnership with Brown was cemented, and as a Shadow Employment Minister, Blair used his legal training to champion the Minimum Wage. Behind the scenes however, Blair and Brown were becoming increasingly impatient at Labor’s failure to “modernize.” The loss of the 1992 General Election reinforced their view that Labor would have to distance itself from the trade unions and Socialism. What had begun as a campaign to improve the image and communications arm of an increasingly sclerotic party, had, by the time that John Smith became leader in 1992 become a covet campaign to break with Labor traditional Democratic Socialist ideology. The campaign’s apotheosis was Blair’s attack on Labor’s Clause 4 constitution, which promised to “Secure for the Workers, by hand or by brain the full fruits of their Labor, based on the common ownership of the means of distribution and exchange.”

In those early years of the Blair hegemony of the Labor Party—his partner, Gordon Brown had meanwhile secured “ownership” of Labor’s domestic economic policy—it soon became apparent that “modernization” was simply a means to an end. That end was power—something most Labor people welcomed after decades in opposition—but the means were opaque. Labor’s Socialism, in practice a Laborist social democracy, was not to be replaced with a Scandinavian style social democracy. Instead Blair and Brown drew their inspiration from Bill Clinton and the “New” Democrats. Brown had, and remains a regular visitor to the United States;

one of his oldest American friends is the veteran Democrat campaigner, Bob Shrum. Where Brown was fascinated by the new policy direction adopted by Clinton and the New Democrats—their attempt to secure the middle ground, and the tailoring of economic policy to assist the working poor, Blair was more taken with the Clinton teams' tailoring of the message with the media in mind. Brown borrowed “workfare” while Blair adopted the very New Democrat slogan, “Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime.” His obsession with “triangulating” the opposition continues to this day. Typically, Blair’s approach is to poach from the right before the Right has had a chance to popularise what it has thought up.

As an electoral strategy, “Triangulation” brought huge dividends. But it never occurred to Blair that by shifting Labor onto Tory territory, it would be much more difficult to challenge popular prejudices. Nor did it occur to him that each time he inched further into enemy territory, others on the Right would goad him further. In time, Blair’s political positioning meant that he would automatically define himself by standing against much of what Labor and the union movement believed. To earn the plaudits he so craved from the Right wing media, Blair invariably set out to antagonise the Labor Party. In so far as there was no where else for Labor voters to go, and that there was tremendous goodwill to a politician who was clearly an electoral asset, the Blair New Labor Project carried all before it. With the help of the unions, who Blair clearly disliked, the new leader transformed the Labor Party from a federal grass roots voluntary association, to a “command and control” top down institution.

Blair and Brown are fundamentally “faith based” politicians, and in a party that historically owed more to Methodism than Marx did, to begin with Brown’s Calvinist zeal and Blair’s Anglo-Catholicism didn’t seem out of place. Socialism was replaced with Blair’s “social-ism,” the new political dispensation often seemed to be based on missionary zeal, the management consultant’s love of the market and the happy clappy encomiums of a series of gurus. And so New Labor could be the party of Amitai Etzioni’s Communitarianism, or it might be Professor Anthony Giddens’s Third Way. “What matters” said Blair once “is what works.”

Blair shared his love of gurus, celebrities and the new wealthy media class with Bill Clinton. Very much the junior intellectual partner, Blair revelled

in his friendship with the equally dextrous and popular American President. In common with Clinton again, Blair shared the view that “globalization,” or old-fashioned unregulated capitalism, would solve the ills of the world. The collapse of the Soviet Empire, and the resultant unipolar world, meant that America and her junior partner, Britain, would help determine a new World Order built primarily on market fundamentalism.

Clinton’s involvement in the successful Irish peace process encouraged Blair to believe that this new partnership could intervene successfully elsewhere. And following the failure of the United Nations—and the European Union—in the disintegrating Yugoslavia, it was to American and Bill Clinton that Blair turned. The Prime Minister was genuinely outraged at the pogroms being conducted on European soil, barely fifty years after the defeat of Hitler’s Germany. He was angered as the UN was held back from intervening in Srebrenica, where hundreds of innocents were slaughtered by Serb militias. Clinton’s decision to send US troops to Europe for the first time since the end of the Second World War cemented that bond. And out of it came a by-product of “globalization”—“humanitarian interventionism.” Blair’s speech to the Labor Party Conference three years ago was redolent of the old Socialist Internationalism that once saw volunteers from Britain sign up to fight in the International Brigades against Fascism in Spain. His speech dwelt heavily on the failure of the international community to halt the genocide in Rwanda—a failure that was to be repeated despite the gravitation from “humanitarian interventionism” to pre-emptive strikes, in Darfur, Sudan, today.

To many on the Left, Blair’s “humanitarian interventionism” was also rooted in his Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook’s, new ethical foreign policy. So when the British Government’s early attempt to help end the civil war in the former West African colony of Sierra Leone became mixed up with an unsavoury mercenary outfit, few cried foul. But closer attention to Blair’s Labor Conference speech reveals more than an iron fist behind the velvet. Not for the first time, Blair had deliberately managed to fuse a traditional Left wing internationalism, with an old imperialism. When I left the conference hall, I told a waiting BBC reporter that “Tony Blair has just donned the cloak of imperial purple.”

So if Blair was shaken by the election of the most Right wing American President in living memory, he didn't show it. Blair had won two landslide elections. In his book, the "old" Europe, led by Germany and France was failing to appreciate the new global order of liberal economics and fast buck capitalism. The "old" Europe often appeared reluctant to sign up to military adventures; its caution was out of step with the new dispensation. In truth Britain's most non-ideological and footloose Prime Minister simply did not comprehend or appreciate just how ideological Messrs Cheney, Rove, Rice and others were. In truth, Tony Blair genuinely had no idea what the "neo-cons" were all about.

And so to Blair's eventual nemesis—Iraq. Blair's studied confusion as to why Britain joined forces with the US in invading Iraq demonstrates his inability to comprehend the post Sept 11<sup>th</sup> shift from "humanitarian interventionism" to the doctrine of the pre-emptive strike. On the one hand, Blair cited the "clear and present danger" of Saddam's non-existent WDM. On the other hand, Blair wanted to rid Iraq of a vile dictator who had massacred thousands of his own people. Had Blair even managed to call the old protagonists of Cold War containment, such as Henry Kissinger, he might have discovered that the man behind the carpet bombing of Cambodia and the Ho Chi Minh trail balked at the idea of pre-emption. Unlike the relationship with Clinton, Blair's relationship with Bush was more one of equals. Post September 11<sup>th</sup>, Blair hoped to use Britain's influence—and support for the Iraq invasion—as a lever to get Bush to back the Israel/Palestine Roadmap. Blair's unconditional support for Bush not only led the British Prime Minister to embellish faulty intelligence in support of war, but to the largest peace time demonstration in modern British history. Liberal Britain began to turn its back on Blair, and when the Prime Minister's impotence ignorance of the neo cons uncritical support of Israel, led to the Road Map being unofficially abandoned, Blair was left without a fig leaf as cover.

From Labor to New Labor, from humanitarian interventionism to pre-emption, from Democrat to Republican, Tony Blair has presided over the collapse of Labor's grass roots, five wars, and the truly remarkable scenario that has a nominal Labor leader identified more with Bush than John Kerry.

Ranged against him is the outrage of Liberal Britain, the impotence of the disenfranchised working class and a political opposition that is splintered. The official Opposition, in the shape of Michael Howard's Conservative Party supported the war on Iraq and therefore cannot capitalise on Blair's strategic blunder. Blair, himself, has no exit strategy from Iraq—and prefers to escape to break bread with those struggling to help Sub Saharan Africa escape from kleptocracy, corruption, poverty and military coups. Conferences and photocalls in Khartoum and Addis Ababa are more congenial than the roll call of casualties from Basra and the fury of Mothers who have lost their sons in what Kofi Annan has described as “an illegal war.”

If John Kerry wins, Blair will be more isolated than ever. True he will do his best to “Triangulate” towards the new American dispensation—but even this very British Houdini may find it difficult to wriggle free from a new Senate Inquiry into the War ordered by President Kerry.

Having declared that he will stay on for a Third full term of four or five years if re-elected in the spring, I give Tony Blair a year maximum.

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