



BRITISH POLITICS REVIEW

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British Politics Review is a quarterly newsletter issued by the British Politics Society, Norway. With contributions from academic and journalistic sources, the *British Politics Review* is aimed at everyone with a general interest for political developments in Britain.

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Blair: End of an era?

After a tumultuous spring, party competition in Britain appears less predictable than in years. With the Conservatives rejuvenated under David Cameron's leadership, and the Liberal Democrats still aspiring to rise from third place, Labour's hegemony is no longer certain. Meanwhile, Tony Blair's government has been plagued by internal difficulties in the party, linked to disputed policies as well as personal failures.



The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, speaking at the G8 summit at Gleneagles in July 2005.

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years of the Labour government, we have furthermore placed our focus on Blair's foreign secretaries and on constitutional reform by devolution.

Nine years after New Labour were swept to power in British politics it seems pertinent to ask whether the project is heading towards its logical conclusion. This first newsletter of the British Politics Society Norway takes a closer look at Blair's leadership, the trajectory of New Labour since coming into office and where it stands today.

We sum up the local elections of 4 May. Also, read more about the Prime Minister's contenders to power. Looking back on the

Greetings from the British Ambassador to Norway

By David Powell, HM Ambassador to Norway - June 2006

I began my posting as Ambassador to Oslo just over a month ago, and already I've been struck by the strength, warmth and variety of the links between the UK and Norway. I've had the opportunity so far to visit Stavanger and the Lofoten Islands, and I plan to travel the length and breadth of the country



*David Powell,
HM Ambassador*

over the course of my posting here. Our long and close history, especially during the Second World War, provides the foundation rock for these links, which of course go well beyond the political, economic and trading relationships that are the main concern of my Embassy. In Oslo we also have the British Council focusing on cultural and educational relations, and Visit Britain promoting London and the UK as a tourist destination.

Both the UK and Norway share a strong democratic tradition. And our political institutions have to confront much the same kinds of problems and issues.

I welcome this initiative to form a British Politics Society in Norway. As I have been learning about Norway in my first few weeks as Ambassador, I have been impressed that so many Norwegians already have an understanding of British politics. But there is of course always scope for new perspectives and greater sharing of ideas among Norwegians, particularly so for those with a professional interest in politics in the UK. A new forum like this will therefore I'm sure be both useful and appreciated.

Lykke til og god sommer!

British Politics Society, Norway, established in June 2006, is politically neutral and has no collective agenda apart from raising the interest and knowledge of British politics among the informed Norwegian public.

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British Politics Review Guest Writer: Annette Groth

In every edition of *British Politics Review*, we invite a guest writer to comment upon current issues in British politics. Our first contributor is Annette Groth, who gives a personal account of her experience of New Labour from 1994 to the present.

Groth is a journalist with the Norwegian national broadcast NRK, where she has also worked as foreign correspondent in London. Groth is the author of several books on issues of British and Irish politics.



Time to go?

By Annette Groth

It was early 1994, and a quiet day for a Norwegian correspondent in London. There was this briefing down in Westminster with an up and coming Labour frontbencher. I had heard of him, but still he was no big star in British politics. With a couple of colleagues I decided to give the briefing a chance.

And there he was. With a fresh face, a charming smile, and an infectious laughter. No pin stripes. He was dressed in shirt, tie, jacket – and jeans. Labour's Shadow Home Secretary Tony Blair made an impression at first sight.

In a similar vein, when he started speaking it was a refreshing surprise. He spoke like no other Labour politician I knew of. He talked about private and public walking hand in hand, about an economy that needed to be kept under tight control, about the middle classes that would not be burdened with heavy taxes under a New Labour government. He spoke about an active foreign policy, and change for Britain. He was joking and laughing, as well, and seemed like he was really interested in meeting a bunch of foreign correspondents in London. Unbelievable, I thought. Interesting, the colleagues and I said afterwards, but we didn't immediately think of him as a Labour leader, because Labour already had their popular frontman. The Scotsman and solicitor John Smith had taken over from Neil Kinnock when Labour narrowly lost the election in 1992. It was widely thought that Smith would lead Labour into a successful win at the next general election.

But only a few weeks after I met Tony Blair that first time, everything changed. The 12th of May 1994 gave a twist to British history. John Smith suffered two heavy heart attacks, and died aged only 55. The way was paved for Tony Blair as the Labour leader. And so he was, after

having won the power battle with Gordon Brown.

Three years later. May again. May 1997, and the general election. After 18 years with Conservative government, time had come for Labour. It was a landslide election victory, led by Tony Blair. He was the nation's new darling. With his wife and three children he moved into Downing Street.

I remember that day clearly. Tony and Cherie Blair were walking hand in hand into Downing Street. The atmosphere was electric. The British were fed up with Margaret Thatcher, her successor John Major and the rest of the Tories. Tony Blair and his *New Labour* was like a breath of fresh air. The majority in the House of Commons was overwhelming. And Blair brought women into British politics. They had been few and far between – now "Blair's Babes", as the tabloids called them, put some colour into Parliament.

Nine years on Tony Blair and Labour are still in power, after having won the general election for a historic third successive term. But the atmosphere is no longer electric, and the contagious Blair-smile has become more of a stiff upper lip.

Firstly, because of the war in Iraq. He wanted to build bridges over the Atlantic, but the British

people didn't like his role as George W. Bush's poodle. People didn't believe in a government that seemed to have "jazzed up" political dossiers about Iraq, to justify going to war; a government that tried to talk itself out of any guilt in connection with the suicide of Dr. David Kelly, the man who revealed how the government worked. Iraq has been the main reason for both Blair and Labour losing support – in the polls, among Labour's own and in the British public.

Secondly, because he made himself a court of unelected so-called advisers, also

known as spin doctors, who were far more influential than the official party machine and the elected members of Parliament. Alastair Campbell has gone, but there are plenty of others still.

Thirdly, because New Labour hasn't managed to keep its promises. Blair's mantra from the 1997 election – education, education, education – still hasn't done very much for schools. And the NHS still have long queues. And there are still far too many poor people. And old people on a basic pension still have problems surviving from day to day. And you can add to the list..

But Tony Blair is still here, although Gordon Brown is standing in the wings waiting to take over.

Blair *has* made difference to Britain. He *has* achieved some political goals. He *has* been a very charismatic leader at times. He and his family *has* put a different atmosphere into Downing Street, not the least when his and Cherie's fourth child, little Leo was born. And he was, like Margaret Thatcher, a leader with a vision. The Third Way.

But now the vision seems to have gone. He is burdened with bad political decisions, with sleaze and scandals, a vivid opposition within his own party. And not the least: In David Cameron the Conservatives have, for the first time in ages, got a leader that seems fresh, focused and able to take up the challenge.

Maybe it's time to go.



British Politics Society
Norway

Blair's foreign secretaries

By Kristin M. Haugevik

Centrepieces. Robin Cook, Jack Straw and now Margaret Beckett constitute the strong foreign secretary trio of the Blair-era in British politics. Interestingly, these otherwise very different political personalities all share the trait of having been foreign secretaries without being distinct 'Blairites'. This could perhaps be seen as a matter of "keeping your friends close but your [political] opponents closer". A more compelling argument, however, is that British foreign policy is increasingly controlled by Number 10, and that compliance has become a more important qualification than ideological beliefs for this prestigious cabinet position. If this is in fact the case, British foreign secretaries certainly face a difficult balancing exercise. While the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) might be under political pressure from Number 10, it concurrently faces managerial and financial pressure from the Treasury – run by Blair's expected successor Gordon Brown. In addition, the Foreign Secretary faces the choice between Blair and Brown on a more personal level.



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ideologically. However, a personal dispute with Brown in the early 1980s hindered further strategic cooperation between the two, and they made up only after Cook's resignation from government in 2003. Cook is perhaps best known for his endeavour to add an 'ethical dimension' to foreign policy, a vision which almost certainly influenced Blair's landmark 'doctrine of the international community'-speech in 1999. However, whereas Blair strived to maintain a 'special relationship' with US presidents Clinton and Bush, Cook often appeared pro-Europe rather than pro-America. This was most likely one of the reasons why he was removed from the FCO after the general elections in 2001. Another plausible explanation is that while Blair was relatively inexperienced in foreign affairs before 1997, he became increasingly equipped for and interested in handling such issues throughout his first term. Hence, it has been argued, he needed a more pliable foreign secretary than Cook. If this was the case, Blair demonstrated a certain talent for prediction: Two years later, Cook resigned from the government, declaring his disapproval of the intervention in Iraq.

His successor, Jack Straw, was more right-wing and Euro-sceptic – qualities which became particularly valuable to Blair when he was forced to make the choice between Europe and the United States over Iraq. Straw possessed the requisite political integrity to defend the government's Iraq-policy publicly – and repeatedly did so. Still,

he shared Cook's political destiny when he was demoted to Leader of the House of Commons in May this year. While some have argued that Straw himself wished to withdraw after five years in the FCO, others have pointed out that ruling out military intervention in Iran and supporting Brown in negotiations on the EU-budget may have hastened his leave.

Unpredictably, Straw was replaced by Margaret Beckett, whose political ambitions once were greater than becoming Britain's first female foreign secretary. Following John Smith's death in 1994, Beckett became acting leader of the Labour party. However, she eventually lost the bid for the leadership to Blair, reportedly because of her strong trade union-links and alleged disloyalty to Smith. Her age, class and gender are also assumed to have worked in her disfavour. Today, her loyalty to the party has finally paid off, favouring her with the position as Blair's (presumably) last foreign secretary. Like her two predecessors, Beckett is not a pronounced Blairite. She is nevertheless expected to remain loyal to Blair's foreign policy doctrine. This arguably strengthens the assumption that it matters less who the foreign secretary is as long as control over British foreign policy ultimately lies in the hands of the Prime Minister himself.

Blair's first foreign secretary, the late Robin Cook, was originally closer to the Brownite than the Blairite camp

The British local elections: from micro to macro politics

By Øivind Bratberg

Elections matter. Local elections are always difficult to analyse as a judgement on national policy. Can a party's downfall or rise at the national level be predicted by observing local elections results? Should party leaderships take on board the result at the polls as a message on their performance?



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In Britain there are some fairly good reasons for giving a qualified yes to these questions, even if many previous local elections have been proved wrong as far as their predictive capacity is concerned. Analyses and comments as well as action on the ground testify to a strong national dimension to the elections on 4 May. There are several reasons for this. First, in the particularities of the British election system, where only a proportion of the local seats revolve each year, this was a London year, where all councils in the capital were on the ballot. Second, rarely is a local election

as permeated by national politics as this year, with two opposition parties eager to present their new leadership, and a Labour government whose election campaign was overshadowed by a list of unfortunate affairs. The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, and the Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, were subject to harsh criticism following the former's extra-marital affairs and the latter's failure to deport a number of foreign criminals released from prison in Britain.

The results of the elections, then, made the government's merits the centrepiece of debate. Predictably, with Labour debilitated in a number of local councils, the Conservatives made strong but not overwhelming progress while the Liberal Democrats, though impressive on a national scale, remained close to status quo. The limelight was thus almost exclusively on Labour's result. Martin Kettle in the Guardian, referring to a crisis in the party that will be 'increasingly difficult to reverse', was mild in his criticism compared with many harsher statements, emanating from the press as well as from the Labour Party

itself. Immediately, calls resurfaced from the back benches for the Prime Minister to give a date for the expected 'ordered transition' that will bring Gordon Brown to No. 10.

Far from heeding to such calls, Mr. Blair instead ordered an immediate reshuffle of his government, dismissing Clarke from his Cabinet and stripping Prescott from most of his tasks as Deputy. As part of Blair's biggest reorganisation of his Cabinet since taking office, Margaret Beckett was also to replace Jack Straw in the Foreign Office. The reshuffle, referred to by Frank Dobson (Blair's former Health Secretary) as 'rearranging the deckchairs of the Titanic', was obviously the outcome of long-term consideration on Blair's part. Nevertheless, it was given a particular flavour by the Prime Minister's timing. With the Foreign Secretary one of the casualties of a local election, one may observe that all levels of politics, from the local to the international, are affected by the storms of the British political landscape.

Devolution: New Labour's calculated gamble?

By Atle L. Wold

Reform returns with a vengeance. Devolution was one of those key issues – together with, for example, education and 'sleaze' in the Conservative Party's parliamentary group – which carried the Labour Party of Tony Blair into office in the landslide victory of 1997. Unlike many other elements of Tony Blair's 'Third Way'-policies, however, the granting of self-government to Scotland and Wales was an issue which set New Labour clearly apart from the unionist Conservatives. Devolution, although an issue which had a history going well back into the nineteenth century in Britain, seemed to reflect New Labour's 'modern', decentralised, trendy, and politically correct approach to government, which contrasted nicely with the Conservatives' emphasis on the unitary British state and on Parliamentary Sovereignty. It was 'Cool Britannia' against 'Old Britannia', and quite simply an excellent vote-winner in the up-beat atmosphere of 1997.



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a final and complete arrangement. Looking at the state of affairs some seven years after the devolved assemblies were opened, however, this seems an over-optimistic assessment, and the ghost which has come back to haunt Tony Blair and his Cabinet is the so-called West Lothian question.

First put forward by the Labour MP for the Scottish constituency of West Lothian, Tam Dalyell, in the 1970s, the question asks why Scottish MPs, once devolution has been granted, should be able to vote on English legislation, when English (and Scottish for that matter) MPs cannot vote on Scottish legislation (since that has been devolved to the new Scottish Parliament)? The constitutional problem raised by this question, it has been argued, can only be solved by, either introducing legislative devolution to all parts of the UK, or by removing the ability of Scottish MPs to vote on English and Welsh affairs. The first option was rejected by the electorate in the North-East region in a referendum held in November 2004 (first region to hold a referendum on this issue). The other alternative, often referred to as the 'in-and-out'-system, has been dismissed by the Labour government on the grounds that it would create a chaotic situation in the House of Commons, with changing majorities for the government depending on what kind of legislation is being voted upon – English, or UK-wide.

Recent developments, however, seem to indicate that the West Lothian question cannot be shuffled under the carpet and

ignored in the longer run. A report just issued by the Labour-dominated Scottish affairs committee, for example, underlined the challenge posed to the devolution settlement by growing anger in England over the power Scottish MPs have at Westminster. The background for this is the use the government has made of its 41 Scottish MPs to ensure a majority for legislation which applies to England only: first came 'top-up fees' at English universities, then foundation hospitals and more recently, the English Education Bill. All were issues which for Scotland have been devolved to Edinburgh, but which for England are handled by Westminster.

In other words, devolution is still unfinished business, and just as Prime Minister William Gladstone realised when he gave up the idea of 'Home Rule All Round' in the nineteenth century, devolution within Great Britain itself would – if implemented – open up a Pandora's Box of challenges to the political system as a whole. One of the more immediate issues to be dealt with is the likely reaction to a change of Prime Minister. Will the growing discontent and concern about the constitutional imbalances created by devolution become any less pressing when, or if, the representative for the Scottish constituency of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath – the Scotsman Gordon Brown – succeeds Tony Blair to the premiership? For New Labour, the chickens may soon be coming home to roost.

Blair's contenders

By Øivind Bratberg

Three-fold competition. Tony Blair is confronted by three political opponents, representing overlapping generations and political views. Ironically, any summary of Tony Blair's political challenge must include Gordon Brown, his ever-present Chancellor and co-strategist of New Labour. The two have a long history together, dating from the sharing of office in Westminster as Blair entered Parliament in 1983. Brown, in many ways a political tutor for Blair, was of the same generation and shared much of his political outlook. The remodelling of the party was an achievement attributable to both; yet, it was Blair who as leader from 1994 would take centre stage. With the Prime Minister consistently engaged in the foreign policy arena, Brown has held a steady hand over the Treasury and influenced a good share of domestic policy. His nine-year spell as Chancellor is expected to come to an end when Blair resigns; when and how has been a recurring point of dispute between the Blairites and Brownites of the Labour Party.



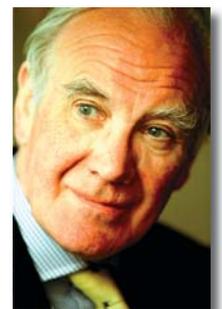
Gordon Brown
© HM Treasury

Young and dynamic, with centrist policies and public appeal: it could have been Tony Blair of the mid-1990s but the description fits the leader of the Conservatives of 2006 equally well. As the end point of a series of failed post-Thatcher leaders of the party, David Cameron seems to have struck a chord with the large segment of middle-class, politically moderate and 'aspirational' classes that Labour under Tony Blair has worked so ardently to attract. Not least, the Conservatives under Cameron are crafting an image of competent and caring, with the leader speaking of mild redistribution, a robust welfare system and strengthening of the public service ethos. Cameron's occupation of the middle ground has led to the curious argument of a left-right swap between the Tory and the Labour leader. Thus, while the Prime Minister in early June praised *private sector* efficiency, Cameron made the adverse statement of the critical value of *public services*. On many issues, however, the Tory leader still remains ill-defined.



David Cameron
© The Conservative Party

The Liberal Democrats remain much to their distress the clear number three in British politics. The general election of 2005 was a clear-cut test of their potential, with Labour tarnished by the Iraq issue and the Conservatives led by the less-than-popular Michael Howard. The Lib Dems nevertheless fell short of climbing the threshold that could make them serious contenders in Parliament. This impression was confirmed in last May's local elections, the first under the leadership of Sir Menzies Campbell. Following the demise of Charles Kennedy as party leader (due to alcohol problems), Campbell was a choice based on much consensus, but somewhat less enthusiasm. One of the party's primary spokesmen on foreign policy, Campbell has earned much respect in the public. Admittedly, his reputation as experienced and trustworthy does not fully compete with the youthful appeal of David Cameron. Low age, however, has rarely been the principal criterion for success in British politics. Campbell will have the 2009 general election as his primary test.



Sir Menzies Campbell
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