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PART I

Politics and government

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1

The Blair premiership

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Tony Blair's continuous eight-year tenure as prime minister equals the lifespan of a two-term US president. By the end of 2005, it will exceed that of every British premier in the last century except for Margaret Thatcher. Lack of time in office is hardly a problem. It is therefore not too soon to make a provisional assessment of Blair's impact. Because he has set a date for his departure there is more of the past than the future about him. And the best may be in the past.

The three phases in Blair's leadership are his three years as leader of the opposition and his two four-year terms as Prime Minister. He led his party to a huge election victory in 1997. But concentration on dominating the media agenda and winning that election meant that, with a few exceptions, little thought was given to a programme for government. In private, he has looked back on the first term as largely a wasted opportunity for public service reform and the second term has been dominated by Iraq and its fallout. In 2001 he claimed that he was more experienced in knowing how Whitehall works, tougher and had a clearer idea of what he would do if he achieved 'the historic second term'.

A second term, however, has rarely enhanced a government's reputation and Blair's has been no exception. On a personal level Blair was troubled by health scares and self-doubt after the damage done to his public standing following the war in Iraq. He was on the brink of resigning in 2004 and in the end announced that he would not serve beyond a third term. Although 2001–5 was dominated by the 'war on terror' and then in Iraq, a number of important decisions were taken – on university tuition fees, foundation hospitals, city academies, an independent supreme court and the NHS internal market. His government could point to continued economic stability and massive investment in the public services. It entered the 2005 general election with a handsome lead on all the key issues apart from immigration and appears to have won the argument about the balance between taxation and public spending. The government also began to develop a more – though not completely – coherent approach

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to modernising the post-1945 welfare settlement based on devolution, decentralisation, diversity and choice.

The third term provides the opportunity to take the reforms further. But the context will be one in which Blair's political capital (a mixture of his reputation and influence) in Westminster has declined sharply and a general election in which his party lost seats and votes.[1]

Blair has often invited comparison with the two agenda-setting prime ministers of the past century, Attlee and Thatcher.[2] He has enjoyed some of the conditions that helped their dominance, including

- a long period of office (he has served longer than Attlee),
- a large parliamentary majority,
- a weak opposition, and
- a favourable climate of opinion.

It can also be argued that Blair inherited a more favourable economic legacy than Attlee or Thatcher, although he and Gordon Brown will dispute the claim.

Yet his record pales in comparison with the accomplishments of Attlee (coping with the transition from war to peace, independence for India, joining Nato, the creation of the National Health Service, and great extensions of public ownership and the welfare state) and Thatcher (trade union reforms, privatisation and curbing inflation). These were, in the jargon, big-picture governments leaving a substantial legacy behind.

If Blair to date has not been an agenda-setting prime minister, despite the above advantages, a main cause may be beyond his control. The great war leaders, Lloyd George and Churchill, faced a dramatic and widely perceived challenge – national survival. The Attlee government was backed by popular expectations that the state could and should play a more positive role in managing the economy and providing welfare than it had previously done in peace-time. In the 1980s Thatcher had to tackle serious problems of trade union power, inflation and declining economic competitiveness that for some commentators raised questions of Britain's governability. But in 1997 Labour's election was the result largely of the voters' wish for a change of government, after 18 years of the Conservatives, and more investment in public services. Blair has not had the

[1] See Richard Rose, *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).
[2] See Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and Its Holders* (London: Allen Lane, 2000). The studies by Rose and Hennessy stand out for their comparative and historical perspective and are less than enthusiastic about Blair's premiership.

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opportunity of facing and triumphing over a defining national crisis as the other leaders did.

Indeed, Blair has cast his own verdict on his record so far, because he has felt he needs to serve a third term to create a worthwhile legacy. He comes across as a dissatisfied leader – dissatisfied with his party, its pre-1994 structure and ethos, Parliament, the system of Cabinet government, the civil service and large parts of the public sector. He has presented himself as new, modern and radical – words that reverberate through his speeches and interviews – although the passage of time decreases the credibility of the rhetoric. At times it is possible to see the self-perceived pathfinder, like Mrs Thatcher, as prime minister of the wrong country.

This chapter examines Blair's impact on key aspects of a prime minister's job. He has self-consciously tried to be a different kind of prime minister. He has had distinctive views about himself in relation to his party, Parliament, Cabinet, Number 10 staff and the public. His Labour predecessors have been negative role models because, except for Attlee, they seemed to have failed.

Party

Any assessment needs to accept the electoral crisis facing the Labour Party when Blair took over. Its fourth successive general election defeat in 1992 confirmed that its core vote was among declining sections of the population – manufacturing working class, council estates and trades unions. It had little following in growing Middle England and the aspirational working class. The New Labour 'project' was about changing the party from top to bottom and involved capturing traditional Conservative sections of the electorate, espousing social and economic policies long associated with the political right (including privatisation and flexible labour markets), and creating a formidable election-winning machine.

A consequence of this success has been to weaken the sense of the party as tribe or family. Although he has been attacked for this it can be argued that at a time of declining partisanship and class cohesiveness, his approach has advantages in reaching out to uncommitted voters. Indeed, the current ideas of triangulation (adopting a position independent of one identified with either Labour or Conservative) and spatial leadership positively favour the leader who wears his party ties lightly.[3]

[3] M. Foley, *The Rise of the British Presidency* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

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His promotion of New Labour has depended on distinguishing it from what he regarded as Old Labour, consisting not only of the left but also of the spend and tax social democrats like Lord Hattersley, and defining himself against the party. Constructing a negative and selective recent history of the party' policies, personalities, institutions and values that had made it outdated and unelectable, he consolidated and extended changes in the party's structure, policies and ethos begun under Kinnock.

Blair and his entourage were impressed by the Thatcher brand of forceful leadership, a view reinforced by the failure of Major's more consensual approach. Strong personal leadership would be required not only to change the party and its direction but also to win elections. Traditionally, Labour had rejected a cult of leadership, a feature reinforced by its pluralist structure and democratic ethos; until 1922 the leader was called 'chairman' of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). But sections of the media and many voters took a dim view of Labour leaders from Gaitskell onwards who faced constant and wearying party opposition. Labour modernisers believed that in the modern era a party's message is carried by and through the party leader. Hence Labour had to become what is called an 'electoral-professional party' and market the leader rather than the party. This appeal worked as long as Blair had plenty of political capital and was seen as indispensable if the party was to gain and retain office. By 2005 Blair was no longer an electoral asset.

Indicators of the decline of the traditional Labour Party are several: a reduction in members and activity, trade union protests that they are marginalised, the rise of polling and focus groups as sounding boards of policy rather than the annual conference and party grass-roots, the minimal role of the policy-making machinery on university top-up fees, foundation hospitals, ID cards and Iraq, and the attenuation of many of the traditional checks and balances in the party. Party membership is now fewer than 200,000, some 50,000 fewer than when he became leader in 1994.

Perhaps decay is a highly probable outcome of a party being in government for a lengthy spell – the state of the Conservative Party by 1992, let alone 1997, as well as Labour by 1970 and 1979 are examples. The paradox is that Blair and Thatcher, although they reinvented their parties, also presided over their decline.

But does this decline matter much? Might Blair see the future as one of 'partyless democracy', one where populist leaders seek inclusive or target

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audiences and communicate with them directly via web sites, Question Time, media interviews, and such television shows as *Richard and Judy*?[4] Perhaps there is less need for mass parties in the age of communication via focus groups, direct mail and call-centres, finance from a mix of wealthy donors and state funding, and policies from think tanks. Parties as electoral organisations can operate as partnership franchises, contracting out key tasks to private and voluntary agencies.

A paradox is that the Labour Party is more dominant than ever in Britain but in some respects is also perhaps weaker than at any time since 1945.

Parliament

Support among party MPs has long been a crucial determinant of a leader's authority. After all, until recently the party's MPs chose and had the right to sack the leader, and prime ministers spent time in the Commons, feeling the need to be physically present and sense the mood of the House. Macmillan, Wilson and Thatcher all confessed to fears before facing Question Time. Late at night in March 1917, a fraught time in the First World War, Winston Churchill was about to leave the House of Commons. Looking around the empty dark chamber he said to a fellow Liberal MP: 'This little place is what makes the difference between us and Germany . . . This little room is the shrine of the world's liberties.'[5] It is difficult to imagine Tony Blair echoing that sentiment.

Since 1979 only John Major after 1992 has had to worry about the passage of his legislation through the Commons, a largely extra-parliamentary electorate now chooses the party leader and governments have other preferred means of communicating with the public. Parliament has been bypassed as prime ministers increasingly 'go public' via the television studio, the *Today* radio programme and town hall meetings, and are drawn to international summits by the growth of intergovernmental institutions.[6]

No leader, however, compares with Blair in searching for opportunities to project himself outside Parliament. He is an extreme example of a

[4] Peter Mair, 'Partyless democracy', *New Left Review 2*, March/April 2000.
[5] I am indebted to Peter Hennessy for the quotation in his 'An end to the poverty of aspiration? Parliament since 1979', unpublished paper, November 2004, p. 23.
[6] See Rose, *The Prime Minister*, ch. 7, and Peter Riddell, *Parliament Under Blair* (London: Politico's, 1998).

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trend that dates back at least thirty years. George Jones and his colleagues at the London School of Economics have shown that attendance, votes and interventions by the prime minister in the House of Commons are all in decline. Prime ministerial statements, usually about war and international conferences, have also declined. On all the indicators Blair is an all-time low scorer. The figures may register the changing roles of prime minister and Parliament and in Blair's case have been emphasised by his huge majorities in Parliament – although it is worth noting that Mrs Thatcher had a large majority in 1983.

Parliament can still remind a prime minister of its capacity to bite back. John Major had a torrid time in the 1992 Parliament and since 2001 Blair has faced substantial rebellions over Iraq, top-up fees and foundation hospitals. That Iain Duncan Smith was the preferred candidate of fewer than half of Conservative MPs undermined his position as a leader from the start. The factors that allowed Blair to take Parliament largely for granted – his personal authority, popularity and large majority – have all weakened. The 2001 Parliament turned out to be the most rebellious in modern times, and he may have a more troublesome time in the third term.

Cabinet

Choosing and managing Cabinet remains an important part of the prime minister's remit. Mrs Thatcher found that her Cabinet colleagues' withdrawal of support in 1990 was fatal. But as a forum for discussion, decision-taking and bonding it has been in decline for many years, a casualty of time pressures, overload and leaks. Under Blair meetings are shorter and have fewer papers before them. Increasingly prime ministers prefer to retreat to Number 10, where they have assembled their own staffs. The Cabinet system appears to be in decline in other Westminster systems such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada: in each there have been moves to a full-blown Department for the Prime Minister.

The Blair style had been demonstrated in opposition. He had little time for his shadow cabinet, while the New Labour project, something of a coup over the party, was largely the work of himself, his entourage and Brown. No opposition leader's office has ever been as well staffed as was Blair's; it was nearly as large as the number of civil servants and political appointees working for John Major in Number 10 at the same

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time. Blair had a virtual prime minister's office in waiting, and aides like Campbell, Hunter, Miliband, Morgan, Powell, Allan, Coffman and Hyman, all moved from Blair's office in opposition to Number 10 in government. In government, the key meeting of the week for Blair remains the 9am office meeting with his staff on Monday mornings, sometimes called a 'Tony meeting'. This meeting is designed to give direction for the rest of the week, as staff review progress and take action on points he has thought of over the weekend. Till very recently he held bi-monthly meetings on his agenda with the ministers for education, health, crime and transport, in addition to traditional regular meetings with the foreign secretary and chancellor of the exchequer.

What pluralism there is comes from Gordon Brown's success in carving out his own sphere of responsibility over economic policy and social policy, widely defined. Blair has had no senior economic adviser. His premiership has been overshadowed by the relationship with Brown, stoked up by the war of the books by journalists. These books have been heavily reliant on sources from within the rival camps and reflect on a premiership that has been the most spinned for and spinned against of any. At the last count a dozen journalists had written studies of Blair and or Brown. Once each side has put its own story into the public domain it usually dismisses the book as 'tittle tattle'.

On one level it is soap opera. But Blair has certainly felt constrained by the leeway he granted, implicitly or explicitly, to his neighbour in Number 11 over entry to the eurozone, economic policy and welfare reform. During the first term Brown's aides let it be known that he was the chief executive, in charge of domestic policy while Blair, concentrating on foreign policy and Northern Ireland, was something akin to that of a head of state – a novel thesis of the dual premiership. By the second term, however, Blair increasingly felt Brown was limiting his ability to leave behind a New Labour legacy. Brown, on the other hand, could point to his record of economic stability, New Deal, attack on poverty and his reputation as the social justice chancellor.

This rivalry is an old story in recent British politics. R. A. Butler and Harold Macmillan were the architects of the post-war new Conservatism. They differed little on domestic policy but competed for the leadership. Such agreement on policy seems to nourish personal rivalry. Together Blair and Brown have been perhaps the most formidable partnership in modern British politics, marginalising the Conservative Party for over a decade. But in government it has been an enormous source of tension.

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Brown's bold demands for a date for an allegedly 'agreed' handover to take place during the 2001 Parliament, largely on the grounds that it was his turn, have no parallel in recent British history: they put in the shade Eden's expectations that Churchill would hand over power well before 1955. Relations deteriorated to the stage where Blair called off his regular Tuesday afternoon sessions with Brown.[7]

There has been a downside to the Blair style of operations. The decline in number and duration of Cabinet meetings, although this has been reversed somewhat in 2004 and 2005, did little to increase the sense of collective ownership among Cabinet ministers. It has been a Tony and/or Gordon show, resembling court politics, a battle of who is in and who is out of favour with Number 10, and who is a Brownite or a Blairite.[8] The fiefdoms were drawing the life from the Cabinet. Until 2005 ministers and senior civil servants were at times exposed to two narratives not just about the succession but also about the direction of government, notably on the euro and public service reform.

The decline of Cabinet has encouraged more informality in decision-making and allowed the rise of an element of cronyism or, depending on taste, a greater reliance on friends and allies, all exemplified in the Hutton and Butler reports. Lloyd George in 1916 and Churchill, already an old man in 1951, relied heavily on friends and confidants. But they pale in comparison to Blair. Mrs Thatcher in 1979 took two relatively junior appointments with her, a political secretary and a chief of staff (in reality an office manager), as well as John Hoskyns, to head a small policy unit. The tenure of all three was short-lived. Her most renowned and long-serving aides, Charles Powell and Bernard Ingham, were appointed through established civil service procedures. Major took with him only Gus O'Donnell (as press secretary) from the Treasury and Judith Chaplin (as political secretary).

Some are convinced that under Blair there has been a decline in the quality of decision-making in the 'den'. He has gone further in making policy in bilaterals, ad hoc groups and informal discussions, what Anthony Seldon calls 'denocracy'. Mandarins, to quote the former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Butler of Brockwell, complain of 'a lack of reasoned deliberation' and 'too much central control'. Butler has argued that the informality, absence of papers and consultation with other ministers and

[7] For an appreciation see Anthony Seldon, *Blair* (London: Free Press, 2004).
[8] Francis Beckett and David Hencke, *The Blairs and Their Court* (London: Aurum Press, 2004).

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aides without the presence of civil servants has had its costs. He claimed in the House of Lords:

> The positive features of that system, designed to draw in the expertise available in all parts of the government in a systematic way and subject policy decisions to constructive criticism, and challenge from those political colleagues with a wider perspective than those grappling with the issues day to day, are still worth pursuing.

Butler's long experience at the centre gave him a special authority to claim that the Blair methods represent a serious departure from that ideal, although some cynics might claim that this is Whitehall code for not being sufficiently consulted. But Lord Owen cited the intelligence failure when complaining of the 'the matey, corner-cutting, somewhat shambolic, structure of No. 10's defence and security decision-making which were revealed in the Hutton hearings'.[9] Cabinet colleagues have complained in private that Blair's liking for bilaterals allows people to believe different things about his intentions. This was notably the case with his late decision to hold a referendum on the EU constitution – it was not discussed in Cabinet and took pro-EU ministers by surprise.[10]

Perhaps this will change, as Blair at the outset of his third term has declared his intention to make more use of the Cabinet system and to involve himself more in the Cabinet committees. He has also decided that Cabinet committees will review progress on key targets rather than conduct regular stocktaking exercises in Number 10 with his advisers and the minister.

The centre

Blair began with the assumption that there was a hole at the centre of British government. Many of his predecessors felt the same, but nobody, not even Lloyd George, has matched Blair's energy in creating a personal machine. Yet despite his recurring attempts to increase the number of staff, units and resources at his disposal, he still seems to feel he lacks sufficient levers. Presumably, the levers are over colleagues and departments.[11]

[9] Lord Owen, 'The ever-growing dominance of Number 10 in British diplomacy', lecture at London School of Economics, 8 October 2003.
[10] On the evolution of this decision, see Seldon, *Blair*, pp. 648–51.
[11] On problems of dependency and implementation, see Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes, 'Presidents, barons, court politics and Blair', unpublished paper, April 2005.

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