

The rise and fall of liberal England

An epic shame and silence covers much of liberal England. Shame and silence are present in a political theatre of frenetic activity, with actors running on and off the national stage, uttering their fables and denials and minor revelations, as in Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*. From the media gallery, there is a cryptic gesturing at the truth, so that official culpability is minimised; this is known at the BBC as objectivity.

Shame and silence reached a sort of crescendo during the recent conference of the Labour Party. Hundreds of liberal people stood and clapped for the Prime Minister, it was reported, for seven and a half minutes. Choreographed in their pretence, like the surviving stoics of a sect, they applauded his unctuous abuse of the only truth that mattered: that he had committed a huge and bloody crime, in their and our name. It was a shocking spectacle.

For those who cling to Blair, the last resort is to make him seem Shakespearean: to invest him with tragedy and the humanity of "blunders" and "cock ups" that might divert the trail of blood and conceal the responsibility he shares for the slaughter and suffering of thousands of men, women and children, whose fate he sealed secretly and mendaciously with the rampant American warlord.

We know the fine print of this truth now: and we are a majority. I use "we" here as the Chartist James Bronterre O'Brien used it in 1838, to separate the ordinary people of England from "the vagabonds" who oppress "what are called our colonies and [which really] belong to our enemies". The criminality of Blair and his diminishing court is felt across this country. It is sweeping aside those in the Labour Party who still plead, "Listen to us, Tony" and "Please have more humility, Tony."

The silence of famous liberals is understandable. Remember the division they skilfully drew in 1997 between "new" and "old". New was unquestionably good for "us". New was a "modernised" system called neoliberalism, as old and rapacious

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as its Thatcherite model. Their propaganda suppressed every reliable indication (such as the venerable British Social Attitudes survey), which left no doubt that most of the British people had “old” priorities and rejected Blair’s ruthless refusal to redistribute the national wealth from the rich to the poor and to protect public services, the premise of so much of British life, just as they rejected his embrace of the City of London and American dominance and warmongering.

The Blair myth was that he was “untainted by dogma” (Roy Hattersley). The opposite was true. For Blair, the issue was always class. When times were more secure, the liberal wing of the middle class would allot a rung or two of their ladder to those below. The ladder was hauled up by Margaret Thatcher as her revolution spread beyond miners and steelworkers and into the suburbs and gentrified terraces, where middle managers suddenly found themselves “shed” and “redundant”. It was to people like these that Labour under Neil Kinnock, then John Smith, then Blair, looked in order to win power. Middle-classness became the political code, as the middle classes sought, above all else, to restore their status and privileges. An ideological Scrabble was played in order to justify the Blair project’s true aims. The “stakeholder” theory was briefly promoted, and there was chatter about “civic” society. Both were new names for old elites. The archaic word “governance” was used to obfuscate real social democracy. There was enthusiasm for the ideas of an American “communitarian” guru who wrote books of psychobabble that impressed Bill Clinton. A “think tank” called Demos filled up the Guardian tabloid on slow days with vacuous chic. Out of this was promoted something called “Middle England”, a middle-class idyll similar to that described by John Major when he yearned for cycling spinsters, cricket and warm beer. That one in four Britons lived in poverty was unmentionable.

When Blair was elected with fewer votes than Major received in 1992, liberalism’s principal organs were beside themselves. “Goodbye xenophobia” and “The Foreign Office says ‘Hello world, remember us?’”, rejoiced the Observer. Blair, said the paper, would sign the EU Social Chapter within weeks, push for “new worldwide rules on human rights and the environment”, ban landmines, implement “tough new limits on all other arms sales” and end “the country-house tradition of policy-making”. Apart from the landmines ban, which was in effect already in place, all of it was false.

Then it was “Welfare: the New Deal”. The Chancellor, said the Observer, “is preparing to announce the most radical welfare Budget since the Second World War”. On the contrary, what Gordon Brown announced was a “welfare-to-work” scheme that was a pale imitation of failed and reactionary schemes already tried

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by the Tories and the Clinton administration. There was no new deal. “A Budget for the people”, said the Independent’s front page over a drawing of Brown dressed as Oliver Cromwell. This was difficult to fathom. Apart from a few crumbs for the health service and education, and windfall taxes on utilities, which their huge profits easily absorbed, Brown’s first budget was from the extreme right, making his Tory predecessor look Keynesian. That was unmentionable, and still is.

Most Labour voters had endured 18 years of cuts in education, social security, disability and other benefits - yet Brown reversed not a single one of them, including a tax base that allows the likes of Rupert Murdoch to avoid paying tens of millions of pounds to the Treasury. Today, nothing essentially has changed. One in four Britons is still born into poverty - a poverty that has hardened under Blair and Brown and remains the chief cause of higher rates of ill health, accidents and deaths in infancy, school exclusion and low educational performance.

“The New Special Relationship” was the next good news, with Blair and Clinton looking into each other’s eyes in the garden at No 10 Downing Street. Here was the torch being passed, said the front page of the Independent, “from a becalmed and aimless American presidency to the coltish omnipotence of Blairdom”. This was the reverential tone that launched Blair into his imperial violence. The new prime minister, wrote Hugo Young, “wants to create a world none of us has known, where the laws of political gravity are overturned”. In the age of Blair, “ideology has surrendered entirely to values... there are no sacred cows [and] no fossilised limits to the ground over which the mind might range in search of a better Britain”.

By the time Robin Cook launched his infamous mission statement, putting human rights at the “heart” of foreign policy and promising to review arms sales on “ethical” grounds, not a sceptical voice was to be heard coming from liberalism’s powerhouses. On the contrary, the Guardian counselled Blair not to be too “soft centred”. Jeremy Paxman assured his BBC audience that even if the new “ethical” policy stopped the sale of Hawk fighter-bombers to Indonesia, their presence in East Timor (where one-third of the population had perished as result of Indonesia’s illegal occupation) was “not proved”. This was the standard Foreign Office lie, which was eventually admitted by Cook.

Why did Blair go all the way with Bush? Apart from his own Messianic view of the world, the Blairite elite are part of the “Atlanticist” tradition of the party. That means imperialism. All those years of Kennedy scholarships, trade union

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fellowships at Harvard and fraternal seminars paid for by the US government have had their insidious effect. Five members of Blair's first cabinet, along with his chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, were members of the British American Project for a Successor Generation, a masonry of chosen politicians and journalists, conceived by the far-right oil baron J Howard Pew and launched by Ronald Reagan and Rupert Murdoch. Blair's invitation to Thatcher to visit him in Downing Street might have offered a pointer to what was coming. But no; dissenters were killjoys. According to Susie Orbach, the psychologist, not taking pleasure in the rise of Blairdom reflected no less than a troubled personality. "It's as though there is something safe in negativity..." she wrote, "you often find [this state of mind] in someone who... can only fight, who can never rest from battle, may be trying to defeat inner demons, hopeless feelings, that are far too frightening to touch directly."

The dissenters have been proved right, and right again. In six years Blair has ordered four bloody wars against and in countries that offered the British no threat, including the longest Anglo-American bombing campaign since the Second World War, against Iraq; and this was before he ordered a land invasion of a country he knew was defenceless.

Andrew Gilligan will probably be pilloried by an establishment tribunal for telling a version of this truth. Lord Hutton (he who sat on the notorious "Diplock" court in Belfast) could and should have recalled Blair for cross-examination, but chose not to. This is a travesty, because the real issue is the criminality of Blair and his coterie. The truth of this is currency now, thanks to the millions who have broken an established silence, with thousands of them going into the streets for the first time and filling the letters pages and shaming the majority of Labour MPs, who chose Bush and Blair over their constituents.

They are the best of this society. They are rescuing noble concepts, such as democracy and freedom, from Blairite windbags who emptied them of their true meaning while claiming to be left of centre. Theirs is an "insurrection of subjugated knowledge", as Vandana Shiva has written. They are the democratic opposition now, owing nothing to Westminster; and their achievements echo the American playwright Lillian Hellman who, in a letter in 1952 to the McCarthyite House Un-American Activities Committee, wrote: "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions." It is this capacity for conscience that makes us human, and without millions around the world demonstrating it, Blair and Bush might well have attacked another country by now. That is still a distinct

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possibility, as the current fitting-up of Iran should alert us. Remember, the warmongers go to such lengths to deceive us only because they fear, as Shelley wrote, the public's awakening:

...like lions after slumber,
In unvanquishable number..
Ye are many - they are few. **JP**