

DEAD MEN WALKING



now.

Spare a thought for Tony Blair. Here is a man who is dead in the water; skewered by his friends more effectively than his enemies could ever have dreamed of.

Ever since he came to power, as leader, Blair has treated the Labour Party more as a Tupperware party than a political party. He was able to do so for two reasons. First, the party was so desperate for power it would have agreed to the slaughter of the first born if he had asked. This was not to come 'til later.

The second explanation lies in his effective dismantling of the party itself. Democratic structures were replaced by consultative ones. Constituency parties were stripped of their critical campaigning roles and turned into local 'sales forces' for New Labour. Many simply died of disinterest and disillusionment. Those that survive do so almost as a last act of defiance; a refusal to accept that we are all Tupperware

This control of the party gave Blair a parliamentary cushion of equally malleable Tupperware MPs, sufficient for him to completely ignore his political critics on the left of the party and have fun and games with the Brown camp, whose hateful loyalty was secured by the promise/presumption of a succession within their own lifetime. Blair may have no deep political convictions, apart from a love of running with the big kids, but he knew how to stitch up a game.

His position was reinforced by the spinning of his own myth that it was New Labour – or better still, Blair himself – wot won it for labour. Independent analysis may have shown that the Tories lost the 1997 election after their financial debacle over the ERM, and in the descent into corruption that followed. Labour would have won as comfortably under John Smith. But, just as propaganda in the USA still leaves a third of the country believing Saddam Hussein was a close mate of Osama bin Laden and al Qaida, so the New Labour machine set out to convince the public that it was Blair, the new messiah, who personally delivered the goods.

At the end of summer 2006 the picture looks decidedly different. An outbreak of civil war within the corridors of power has brought an end to the Blair premiership. For the record, it is a civil war that the Left has played no part in. There is no love lost between the Brown and the Blair camps, but the descent into disarray is sinking both ships. The disarray is political more than personal. Labour's shameful silences over the bombing of Beirut, the invasion of Southern Lebanon and the systematic destruction of the country's infrastructure has brought new levels of public contempt for the administration.

Had Saddam Hussein flattened Kuwait and its infrastructure, in the way Israel has done to Lebanon, Blair and Bush would have been charging into the UN with a resolution demanding the right to unlimited war, sequestration of assets and permanent occupation. The morally vacuous nature of New Labour stared people in the face. Only Foreign Office Minister Kim Howells had the courage to express his outrage at the carnage taking place, once from the streets of Beirut, and again later in the UK.

Blair the messiah became Blair the liability. The assassination, when it occurred, came not from Brown (the absent), but from those loyal to the Blair project. Junior ministers, seeing whole political careers set to crumble under the wrath of the electorate, decided to tell Blair to go.

There is no way back from assassination by your friends. Blair can stumble on, but his friends want him to go and no one else wants him to stay. The Prime Minister is dead man walking. His only consolation seems to be that Brown looks to be walking too.

Eighteen months ago opinion polls suggested that a swift shift from Blair to Brown would have given Labour a distinct boost in popularity. Now voters are saying that Brown would do nothing to lift Labour from the nadir of popularity Blair has taken us to. Between them, the neighbours from hell are seen as untrustworthy, scheming and equally responsible for the policies most disliked by the public. Musical chairs around the same policies no longer looks a safe bet for MPs who are already looking at next years elections around the UK (and at the general election only a couple of years later).

However unfashionable it may seem, it's time to put the politics back into politics. As Labour begins to assemble for its annual conference in Manchester we need to put at least two heresies on the table for scrutiny.

A majority of people in Britain now want our troops to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan. A majority also believe we are losing the war on terror. Tragically, Blair's legacy is likely to be that of doing more to recruit for al Qaida than al Qaida could ever have done for itself. His inability to stand up against the transgressions of his friends has played into the hands of his enemies. Hezbollah, Hamas and al Qaida would not have grown in strength so prodigiously had US/UK policies in the Middle East not been so grossly misplaced and unjust. We need a new foreign policy that re-invests in diplomacy rather than conquest.

No less urgent is the need to destroy the myth that neo-liberal, free market economics is the road to salvation. The planet is being driven to self-destruction by an obsession that nothing matters but the immediate, that nothing should obstruct the pursuit of the cheapest. Scientists, however, tell us that if we want to survive the century we may have 10 years in which to turn the whole shape of economics around.

Blair's administration is dead. Civil servants know this and will all now be on a go slow until an actual change takes place. If Blair had any sense he would realise that the Party conference in Manchester offers the only platform from which he can declare his own departure... and go. Anything after this will be a process in which he is simply hounded out of office. He faces a choice between clarity and vanity. The rest of us in the Labour Party have a different choice. Can we transcend the prospect of an unedifying scrap between yesterday's men and yesterday's policies? Can we find a new leader with an inspiring vision of a different tomorrow? If not. We will remain in the mess Blair leaves behind.