

CARRY ON PLOTTING



Gordon Brown's 'make or break' speech to the Parliamentary Labour Party was not a bravura performance. It didn't need to be. There were moments of passion, moments of humility, but the revolutionary moment had come and gone before the meeting even started.

In the world of vanity politics there has to be another contestant if there is to be a contest. The 'coupistas' couldn't find one. Moreover, as Brown astutely observed, having read through every resignation letter, he could not find a single issue of policy or politics that the would-be assassins disagreed with him on.

The delusional part of the meeting, however, was for Brown to conclude that "today, there are no major policy issues that divide the Party upon itself." Labour's disastrous election results and the series of cock-up decisions (including treatment of the Gurkhas) were put down to presentational problems. MPs were promised a new era of openness and a 'listening' Prime Minister who would bring the Party back together.

Some will have believed him. Many more 'wanted' to believe him. Others didn't believe him at all, but feared that a change of leader would force an early General Election. There was no palpable interest in the PLP for the assisted suicide option. But nor was there any evidence of meaningful life left in the body politic of the PLP.

For the Left, this was a surreal experience. We had no basis for springing to Brown's defence any more than for throwing ourselves into the embrace of the New Labour assassins. Those of us who had opposed the process of shoe-horning Brown into No. 10, simply distained the attempts to shoe-horn him out. Where were the politics that would address the moment as a crisis of direction rather than presentation?

Thus it was that Brown received the ringing endorsement... of 6 months probation. By the end of the year, if Labour's fortunes have not revived, there will be renewed pressure for a spring coup. If MPs believe that some at least could save their seats in an election campaign fronted by 'anyone but Gordon', then the coup will happen.

Already there are MPs preening themselves as cheerleaders advocating change... fixed term parliaments, proportional representation, reform of the House of Lords, an enhanced role for Select Committees and a dozen other twiddly bits about the democratic process. The trouble is that unemployment will still be rising. The poor will be getting poorer. There will be pressure for savage cuts in public spending. Transformation into a post-fossil fuel economics will have been forgotten. And climate change policies will have sunk into the scam of emission trading schemes (out of which only bankers and speculators stand to gain). It is hard to believe that the electorate will want to reward Labour for any of this.

There is a part of me that wants Gordon's glasnost to work. Campaign Group MPs have written to him

offering to bring forward a dozen policy changes that would address the big challenges facing society, and put Labour back in touch with our real electorate. There has never been a reply to our request for a meeting. No one is holding their breath.

It isn't just the Left, however, who are to be left out of the process. Glasnost itself barely got out of the door of the PLP meeting. On the corridors outside, the press were already being briefed about new measures Gordon would be bringing to the House of Commons in the coming weeks: further reforms of Parliament, an inquiry on Iraq, new policies on social housing. Some may be welcome, but none will have been prepared by Gordon 'listening' to anyone, other than the same inner voices that got things catastrophically wrong in the past.

The likelihood is that these measures will have the same cloak-and-dagger feel as everything else from the Blair-Brown era. They will not redistribute from the rich to the poor. There will be no radical decentralisation of financial power (giving revenue raising powers – including local Bonds – back to local authorities). Taxpayers will be asked to bail out speculators, but not the other way round. And the planet? Well, just hang on to the rollercoaster.

This is what will take the Labour government towards the end of the year. By then, New Labour's plotters will have regrouped. A veil will have been drawn across their earlier embarrassment of premature articulation. They will have a succession plan, but not a political strategy. Nothing in New Labour makes it fit to govern in an era of the most turbulent challenges humanity has ever faced.

New Labour has become its own Greek tragedy. Its hubris destroys everything in its path, including (potentially) the Party itself. The Labour Party has to rediscover a will to deconstruct the whole architecture of neo-liberalism that has so disfigured the last 20 years. Unless we replace this with a different politics of interdependence, Labour will become a political sideshow. No amount of political ambition can fill that gap. No amount of plotting can make good the defects of relevant policy. This is the legacy of New Labour... with or without Gordon.