

Blair: what lies behind the mask?

Cliff Jones

Francis Beckett, David Hencke and Nick Kochan, *Blair Inc. The Man Behind the Mask*, John Blake, 374pp, £20.00 ISBN 978-78418-370-7

Note: This review was written before the resignation of Ed Miliband as leader of the Labour Party and Tony Blair's announcement that he planned to give up being Peace Envoy for the Quartet.

My specialisms are the professional learning of educators and political education. The specialisms have often intertwined. Before writing my response to this book I want, therefore, to be open about my perspectives, prejudices and priorities. Did I say 'open'? This is about Blair: the moral chameleon who has gone to extraordinary lengths to keep his mask on while the authors struggle to prise it open.

A review of a book usually involves making a judgement on the work of the author or authors. It is, however, the subject of the book that drives me to respond rather than review. I shall do my best to dampen my disgust in order to make clearer points but I know that I cannot expunge it. If you think that invalidates what I write I apologise; but I am going to write it anyway.

During Blair's time as prime minister I had many opportunities to observe and respond to how New Labour did government and politics, and many reasons for doing so. Very briefly, Blair et al did their best to dispense with that untidy thing we call 'democracy'. The traditional understanding that governments were accountable to the people was stood on its head and we became accountable to government: the country was 'performance managed'. The process went something like this.

Well-managed focus groups constructed a version of 'the consciousness of the people' (yes, a pretentious attempt was made by Phillip Gould, Blair's focus group operator, to reference Hegel). This was reported to Blair and courtiers on *The Sofa* constructing policies with grand references to 'progress', 'reform', 'modernisation' and 'choice'. Policies were then transformed into targets. Very controlled and carefully manipulated consultation

took place concentrating on implementation. Targets (policies) were delivered (it was, I kid you not, referred to as 'deliverology'). The people at the bottom of the policy food chain were then inspected to measure how well they had hit the target. This could mean losing your job. It certainly meant a lot of stress. But it also meant that we were all expected to follow the new religion: to remain 'on message'. New Labour was strong on liturgy.

The old Labour Party with its inefficient ways and a tendency to allow a bit of argument, even the occasional political punch up, was Blair's main enemy and his courtiers such as Campbell and Powell and Mandelson ran a very tight ship. If they had not our foreign policy would have been far less efficiently capable of inflicting upon innocent people death, destruction and displacement. Old, messy, unclear, disturbing and discomfiting values such as humanity might have been allowed to surface. They got in the way so they were suppressed, as was dissent and dispute. However, that was then but this is now

So what has changed since the great man left office? Or, what is now becoming more and more obvious? And what is this book revealing? More and more and more I am seeing an incompetent Blair still trying to work in the old way but without the curb of a Labour Party that from time to time slowed down or even stopped his almost Neroesque urges. He has no Sir Humphrey Appleby to call upon as head of a vastly experienced and rather knowledgeable civil service. Yes, he has retained some old cronies feeding flattery to him while simultaneously feeding off the tables he shares with some really undesirable dictators. But his court is now peopled with well paid third-rate appatchiks (apologies to any that rise to the second rate) whose entire purpose in life seems to be to erect a force field between him and anyone with an enquiring mind. Should the force field be penetrated the secondary defence is a most sophisticated set of words and phrases right out of the spin-doctor's manual. These are not lies of course. The best spinners never tell lies but provide versions of the truth that leave you wondering if you inhabit the same universe.

And, should you be interested in that wonderful euphemism 'tax efficiency', it would seem entirely possible that one day someone will design an entire degree course on how Blair's set of enterprises manage to remain legal while hiding their accounts from view.

The willingness of Blair to sup with, sing to and fawn over some seriously nasty despots ought to astound us. To some extent it is astounding but why so? Possibly because people like me cannot, quite, come to terms with the fact that a fully paid up member of the Labour Party can behave like this. I remember being horrified at a family story (totally unverifiable) that my cousin who was a pork butcher slipped the occasional pound of sausages to Harold Wilson during rationing. Gosh, if that gets out it will be the end of him we thought. Looking back, with Blair in mind, it seems almost like a cuddlesome bit of corruption.

Incidentally, in Robin Cook's book (*The Point of Departure*) he relates a chat he had with Roy Hattersley who was reporting a conversation between Blair and a journalist when he was prime minister. From memory it went something like this: Blair referred disparagingly to Harold Wilson's two sons as not having benefited from a good school environment, unlike his son Euan. 'But', said the journalist, 'one is a headteacher and the other is a professor at the Open University'. 'Exactly', said Blair, 'I hope my children can do better than that'. As Old Labour stalwarts with a huge respect for education you might imagine the effect upon Hattersley and Cook of this revelation of the values of Blair.

I guess we all knew that as a Peace Envoy he was worse than useless. I now have a clearer idea of just how much worse than useless he has been. Rather than merely failing to do a good enough job his impact has made things worse. I suppose we could all have guessed that but the authors of this book provide much needed evidence to back up such a judgement.

A mistake made by the Quartet who gave him his job as envoy was to fail to tie him to any of the normal codes of practice to which most people in paid employment are subject. In the UK, when a minister meets, say, a pressure group a civil servant must be present to take notes. Blair submits to no such rules and conventions. He visits some rather dodgy rulers, ostensibly to advance the peace process, but often takes with him no official working for the Quartet: he takes people who work for him, Tony Blair, and, lo and behold, he ends up with a contract: a personal contract often worth many millions.

Palestinians, and those Palestinians Israel insists upon classifying as 'Israeli Arabs', must

endure incredible humiliation and suffering while being told to be patient (you might be interested to know that the Modern Hebrew word for patience has the same root as the verb to suffer, or perhaps not) but Blair might almost be an advocate, not merely for Israel, but for the likes of Netanyahu. The book does not mention this but while Israel was committing unspeakable atrocities in Gaza in the summer of 2014 Blair was throwing a birthday bash for Cherie. He could have waited until her actual birthday, 23rd September, but the weather was better during the massacre.

'Sham' is an accurate word to describe Blair's faith project but does not give the full picture. As PM he transformed many community comprehensives into faith schools, thereby dividing up communities according to religion. I used to be puzzled why someone who kept telling us that inter-faith initiatives brought people together also wished to separate them. In terms of educational policy I was making the classic error of assuming that this policy made some sort of sense that eluded me. It doesn't: the policy is incoherent and a nonsense. *But*, it reveals what is key to most of Blair's initiatives: the bigger the nonsense the louder the rhetoric.

His faith project is heavily funded by the money of strong US supporters of Israel. It is also skewed by the fact that Blair seldom turns away from an opportunity to demonise Islam. But what makes me question Blair's very public commitment to anything at all religious is that when he has an opportunity to help people of different faiths to stop killing each other he prefers to sit down with dodgy dictators and negotiate a contract showing them how to make a better job of presenting themselves to the world. While Blair is in some palace, glad handing and grinning, political dissidents and religious groups are being rounded up, killed and tortured. This does not bother him. He claims to be a Catholic. I am an atheist but for years I worked with many Catholics (actually, from the same Archdiocese in which Cherie grew up) and I simply cannot see him as any kind of Catholic or Christian. The book alludes to the uncomfortable fit of Tony and Cherie in the Catholic Church. It is almost as if the Church was received into Blair and not Blair into the Church. Of course Blair does not 'do God' as Alastair Campbell once famously said but God has been recruited to serve Blair.

By the way, since I have a lot of experience of designing, examining and validating learning and assessment programmes at many levels, I would be fascinated to know more about the programmes and modules operated in various universities by and with the Tony Blair Faith Foundation (TBFF). We may assume that universities such as Harvard have very high academic reputations but I believe that today

such universities can easily be manipulated by money and promised reputational advancement. If anyone knows better please let me know.

His Africa Governance Initiative (AGI) is, however, at least one project that seems to have done some good but not because of him. Some of the young postgraduates that he has working with various governments trying to make the levers of government operate more effectively suddenly had to deal with Ebola. They rolled up their sleeves and did the job. They made communications work much better; they got notification times down and did much more to help. What those young people did was to acquire a purpose. Good for them! This was not Blair's purpose, however. His purpose is to show genocidal dictators how to look good, for a price.

There is a mass of stuff in this book. We learn a lot about his cronies and about how Mandelson and Cherie herself have got into the same act, though they perform at different venues. There seems to be a lot of lucrative world to be carved up by Blair and Blairites. While some colleagues have stayed close others have drifted away somewhat, though operating to the same values. We learn about the family property portfolio and we also learn from people who became disillusioned with him. That includes the British government that has yet to summon up the courage to tell him to stop getting in the way of its own diplomacy. Who knows, politicians in power today might be reluctant to attack someone who can show them how to live 'the good life' another day.

And we learn much about the greatest power within the Labour Party. This is the Progress Group. I really thought I knew a lot about this group but its influence on behalf of Blair is huge: more than I thought. Ed Miliband has a terrific task on his hands if he wishes to diminish the power of this very well funded pro Blair group. I still work in education and I find it very upsetting to know (not from the book) that Tristram Hunt who is a prominent member of this group seems to have no intention of re-attaching schools or education in general to democratic processes and institutions. What he seems to be offering is a slightly less awful version of what Michael Gove has given us; and Gove is a self-proclaimed Conservative Blairite.

We also learn from the book about a world of unelected rich networkers who always seem to have handy a spare private jet. It is a very secret world. Also rather secret is McKinsey, the management consultancy that provides for Blair both apparatus and a model for the evasion of scrutiny. We might think that we live in a democracy but we deceive ourselves if we imagine that, for example, a good old-fashioned general election represents a fulcrum and that our hands are upon a lever. In Blair's world those

hands are hidden and an election barely registers as a fulcrum.

But, to cut a lot short, my abiding impression is of the emptiness of the man. He is actually useless at government and politics. Two things sustained him in the past. One was that among his courtiers were some very determined and clever people such as Michael Barber. Even Barber allows and enjoys the description of his philosophy as 'deliverology'. The other was that in the past he took a lot of trouble with speeches and preparation for Question Time etc. He could appear intelligent and to be a master of his brief. No longer! Bullshit only spreads so far and some of the people who pay him are noticing. His hot air balloon is not coming down just yet because he still has friends in Kuwait for example and the USA but it really is only hot air that keeps him up.

I have said many times that he is poison (mixing up my metaphors of hot air and poison) and that he debauches everything he touches. For me, and I don't expect everyone to share my views, but for me what he helped to bring about in Iraq was an extension of his normal way of working. His own Party manifesto said that there would be no tuition fees. He wanted them so by a combination of diligent courtiers and his mastery of rhetoric we got them. No one was killed though the stupidity, even the futility, of the policy is clear to see. Afghanistan and Iraq? Who wanted them? He did and he got them. Not only were people killed but also an entire region has been wrecked. He rationalises that away. He is, we must admit, pretty good at rationalising away such minor matters as death, destruction, torture and more such.

Who has the antidote to his poison? We do. It's called reason and evidence and ordinary mundane human values. His hot air balloon has lots of holes in it. So far, his ability to blow more hot air into it has kept it up. But every day another hole appears. I want to see the entire thing coming down to earth with a bang.

If you have managed to read this thank you for indulging me. I said I could not review the book. Emotions are too strong. Just now I asked my wife if she wanted to read it. She replied that seeing his face on the cover was enough to make her sick.

After reading so much evidence, including evidence for the hiding of evidence, do you know what? That man pisses me off big time!

Back to the start: what does lie behind the mask?

How many words do you know for 'charlatan'?

A version of this review also appears in www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk