A lesson from history regarding Mr. Blair

# Edward Pearce’s The Great Man, Sir Robert Walpole

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*Edward Pearce* The Great Man, Sir Robert Walpole: Scoundrel, Genius and Britain’s First Prime Minister *(London: Jonathan Cape, 2007) 352 pp.*

A prime minister has drawn unprecedented power into his own hands. Exploiting fear to maintain his hold on the government, democratic rights are curtailed by punitive legislation. There is corruption in high places—the sale of honours is rumoured and financial chicanery is rife, speculative bubbles threaten the stability of the state and economy, and are covered up. A rich elite compete for power and wealth while the majority of the population are excluded from political power...

It all sounds so familiar, but this is eighteenth century Britain and the prime minister in question is Robert Walpole, not Tony Blair. Edward Pearce’s new book is an account of the life and career of Britain’s first prime minister who held power from 1721 to 1742. Strangely, this is the first full-scale biography of Walpole since J.H. Plumb began the task, but gave up after the first volume.

Walpole has been credited with keeping Britain out of foreign wars and laying the basis of the Hanoverian stability on which Britain’s world hegemony was founded in the nineteenth century, but historians and biographers have been curiously reluctant to portray the man. For Pearce, Walpole’s contempt for war is his sole virtue—“more evident to our age than his.” What he objects to most strongly in his subject is that “Walpole was about power—acquisition of power, keeping of power and getting rich by power.... Walpole did not invent English political corruption, but he turned it into a public company.”

Perhaps it is because Walpole’s life and career accord so badly with the self-constructed image of Britain as the home of parliamentary democracy that no other biography of the man who was satirised by Henry Fielding as Jonathan Wild, the Great Man, by John Gay as Mr. Peachum in *The Beggar’s Opera*, by Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels* and also attacked by Alexander Pope has ever been completed. A prime minister who could survey the members of the House of Commons and say that every man had his price because he had paid it and bought their loyalty is not an inspiring figure, but nonetheless, it is to Walpole that we can trace many of the features of the modern British political system.

Walpole was the first prime minister to live at 10 Downing Street. He did not do so as prime minister, since such an office was considered to be inconsistent with the constitution. The title was only ever applied to him as an insult. It was one of many epithets he acquired in his long career. His official position was that of First Lord of the Treasury and that is still the title on the door of Number 10. Walpole bequeathed the house to his successors as their official residence.

More fundamentally, Walpole was the first leading minister of the crown who maintained his position by his ability to dominate the House of Commons, rather than through the favour of the monarch. Unlike previous leading ministers, Walpole remained in the House of Commons and exercised political power through his own efforts to secure a majority. He only accepted a peerage when he fell from power. While he still retained some ability to manipulate events from behind the scenes in that role, his career essentially reflects the emergence of the House of Commons as the dominant political institution in British political life.

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British politics has undergone many transformations between Walpole and Blair. In Walpole's day, the rotten borough and the pocket borough were common and parliamentary seats often went uncontested because they were effectively in the gift of leading landowners. With the emergence of the working class in the nineteenth century, it became necessary to widen the franchise and reform the electoral system. Early in the twentieth century, the Labour Party emerged as the party of the trade unions with mass working class support. Yet despite these major social and political changes, one of the consistent themes of British political life in the intervening centuries has been the way in which the office of prime minister has been strengthened to an extent that would be thought unusual and unwise in any other representative democracy.

There are few formal checks and balances on the powers of the British prime minister who, so long as he or she can maintain the loyalty of his cabinet and a majority in Parliament, exercises many of the prerogatives once accorded to the monarch.

Indeed the office of prime minister was strengthened as the British state came under greater challenge from the working class and class tensions were sharpened by revolutionary upheavals abroad. The first time the title was officially used was in 1905, and the first time it was used in an Act of Parliament was in 1917. Although the political parties, the electorate and the electoral system have changed, the institution of prime minister has retained a remarkably similar position in the body politic since Walpole first began to create it in the middle of the eighteenth century.

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