

Britain: The Guardian whitewash of Mr Blair

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19 May 2007

The cloying nostalgia, mild rebuke and genuine sense of loss that pervades much of the commentary by Britain's *Guardian* newspaper on the imminent departure of Prime Minister Tony Blair are hard to stomach.

Blair leaves the office of prime minister reviled by the majority of the British public and viewed by many as a war criminal for his part in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. A poll by Populus for the London *Times*, on the evening he announced his June departure, for example, found that nearly three fifths of all voters, and a third of Labour supporters, think that he "lied to the country over Iraq, and that overshadows everything else he has done, and tried to do, as Prime Minister." Seventy-one percent of voters do not trust him, and just 3 out of 10 voters are sorry that he is stepping down.

The *Times*, itself a Murdoch paper supportive of Blair, commented, "Assessments of the Blair years are dominated, even distorted, by Iraq. For many, it is the prism through which everything else is seen. This makes a detached analysis of Mr. Blair's overall record more elusive at this stage."

Yet, scour the pages of the *Guardian* and one cannot find anything resembling a scathing critique of Blair on Iraq by any of its regular columnists. The paper had to draft in Avi Shlaim, professor of international relations at St. Antony's College, Oxford, to say what needed to be said: "Blair came to office with no experience of, and virtually no interest in, foreign affairs, and ended by taking this country to war five times. Blair boasts that his foreign policy was guided by the doctrine of liberal interventionism. But the war in Iraq is the antithesis of liberal intervention. It is an illegal, immoral and unnecessary war, a war undertaken on a false prospectus and without sanction from the UN."

Elsewhere, Iraq is generally portrayed as Blair's one major failure—admittedly coupled with other lesser failings such as "control freakery." This constant attempt to shift Iraq from centre stage in people's view of Blair is essential for those whose main aim is to prepare the way for the continuation of Labour's pro-big-business agenda under Brown. But something else is needed also. The essential thrust of Labour's domestic economic and social

programme must be concealed and repackaged.

Leading these efforts is Polly Toynbee, the *Guardian's* "Commentator of the year." She wrote on May 11, the day after Blair's announced resignation, "But now the waiting is over, it's time to look back with pre-emptive nostalgia."

True to her word, a panegyric followed of unintentionally Swifitean dimensions:

"Make no mistake, at home he leaves behind a country far better than he found it—and unimaginably better than it would have been under 10 more years of Conservative rule....

"Blair's Britain is a better place to live in, especially for the least well-off....

"Blairism has become the national creed.... Social justice arm-in-arm with economic success is not the Third Way, it's the only way now.

"Labour has combined unaccustomed economic success with unprecedented improvement in the public realm.

"The fact is, after Tony Blair no party can be elected without espousing Labour's progressive social policies.... Progress is hard-wired across the political spectrum...."

And finally, ending an accompanying piece entitled "Disaster in Iraq masks the truth: Blair's brand of social justice by stealth transformed Britain forever," she insists: "let no one diminish his social achievements that outshine every government since [Clement] Attlee."

Attlee was the post-war Labour leader who presided over the creation of the welfare state. Blair heads the government that has done more than even Thatcher to dismantle it.

Since 1997, Labour has overseen a historically unprecedented shift in wealth away from the working class and into the coffers of the major corporations and a fabulously rich elite.

In the year Labour came to power, the top 1,000 wealthiest people in Britain controlled a combined fortune of £100 billion. Ten years later, this has more than trebled to a combined £360 billion. There are now 68 billionaires living in Britain, dubbed the world's first "onshore tax haven," thanks to Blair's slashing of corporate tax and refusal to close numerous loopholes, which together relieve around half of Britain's richest of the obligation to pay any income

tax whatsoever.

Britain has become one of the most socially polarised countries in the world, with 1 percent of the population owning more than 23 percent of all wealth and 62 percent of total liquid assets, whilst the poorest half of the population owns just 6 percent of the wealth and less than 1 percent of liquid assets.

Accompanying this transfer of wealth and fuelling its growth has been Labour's move away from universal welfare provision to means-tested benefits and the privatisation of public services such as education and health by means of the Private Finance Initiative.

For their part, the trade unions have facilitated the growth of low-paid employment and casualisation, which leave many struggling to survive. Child poverty in the UK remains the worst in Europe, and pensioners are often reduced to eking out an existence on the (full) basic State Pension of £87.30 per week.

Debt has become a terrible fact of life for millions, with the UK's total personal debt now exceeding £125 trillion, and average household debt approaching £9,000, or £60,000 including mortgages. This is accompanied by record levels of bankruptcy.

Such is reality. What then is one to make of Ms. Toynbee?

She is, of course, something of an easy target. For years she wrote of Blair like a breathless political groupie, before beginning the process of transferring her ardor to Brown. Nevertheless, she remains the embodiment of a social type—the former liberals and radicals who gathered around the New Labour project in the mid-1990s and who remain its most fervent—though increasingly worried—supporters.

Toynbee broke with Labour in 1981 to support the right-wing breakaway Social Democratic Party, even standing as a candidate. She rejoined Labour after the SDP collapsed and Labour adopted most of its rival's policies—with Blair citing the SDP's leading ideologue, Roy Jenkins, as a mentor.

This layer has indeed done well as a result of Labour's period in office, paying less tax, securing higher salaries and benefiting from the explosion in property values in the southeast—particularly as a result of London's growth as a centre for global financial speculation. Like Toynbee, many are naturally receptive to Labour's argument that benefits should target the “most-needy”—so that their own taxes can remain low. Many have access to private medical care, so are neither overly familiar nor overly concerned about the decay of the National Health Service. And their children either attend private schools, or the better state-schools thanks to the postcode of their family home. In any case, home schooling by themselves or a private tutor ensures that a commitment to state education isn't too onerous a price to pay for a place in “progressive” and “liberal” polite society.

However, even the most complacent former Blairite cannot but be aware that things have gone badly wrong—given the collapse in support for Labour amongst working people in its former heartlands. For her part, Toynbee is clearly worried, because her rhetoric claiming a progressive content to Labour's policies is so starkly at odds with the bitter experience of working people.

That is why she was clearly upset when Blair boasted in his resignation speech, “Look at our economy—at ease with globalisation, London the world's financial centre. Visit our great cities and compare them with 10 years ago. No country attracts overseas investment like we do.”

Toynbee warned, “If he rides off into a sunset of corporate greed and not public service, he risks tainting how his years in office are seen in retrospect.

“He never talked of equality. Yesterday, again he celebrated the arrival of oligarchs to tax-haven London. Fear of offending the rich led to Britain's inequality-gap rising, so redistribution to the poor was like running up a down escalator of cash.

“The question now is whether a new leader can halt those rampant forces driving society ever further apart.”

The obvious answer to Toynbee's question is no, he cannot. Nor, for that matter does Brown have any intention of altering in any way Labour's drive to shape Britain into a playground of the super-rich at the expense of working people.

This will ensure that all the apologetics for Blair by Toynbee and her type will not halt the process now well underway of a historic break with Labour by the working class. And it will have the additional benefit of exposing the *Guardian's* own pretensions to represent progressive opinion, which does so much to stultify intellectual and political discourse in Britain.



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