



Parliamentary Book Shelf

Tony Blair, *A Journey*, London, Arrow Books, paperback edition, 2011, 718 p.

This book continues the tradition of British prime ministers reminiscing at the end of their careers about their lives and legacy. John Major, Margaret Thatcher, Edward Heath, Harold Wilson, Anthony Eden, Clement Attlee, Ramsay MacDonald, Lloyd George, Arthur James Balfour, not to mention Winston Churchill, Robert Peel and Robert Walpole, all wrote memoirs.

The tradition in Canada has not been as strong, perhaps reflecting our more modest and self-effacing disposition. While Tupper, Borden, Diefenbaker, Pearson, Trudeau, Mulroney, Campbell, Chrétien and Martin all published recollections about their political lives, Macdonald, Mackenzie, Abbott, Thompson, Bowell, Laurier, Meighen, Bennett, Saint-Laurent, Clark and Turner did not. Neither did our longest-serving prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, although his diaries were subsequently printed.

The legacy of Tony Blair seems on the surface shaky. His attempt to transform the Labour Party into a modern, progressive, less ideological and centrist party suffered a major setback with the election of Ed Miliband as leader in September 2010: the first press reports upon his becoming leader were “Miliband Declares New Labour Dead.” The young rioters who took to the UK streets

this summer have been called “the children of Tony Blair” as they were raised without hope or aspiration.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which he was instrumental in raging have left many Britons with bad tastes in their mouths. And his hopes of bringing a new way of doing politics were dashed with the “cash for honours” scandal which came towards the end of his administration in 2007. Yet such an assessment places too much emphasis on the role of one individual, even a world leader, in shaping the political, economic and social forces at play on the domestic and world stages. To judge a legacy the best one can do is assess whether the person’s heart was in the right place. There is much evidence that Tony Blair’s was.

In his book Mr. Blair says that he wrote his own speeches (p. 457). On February 22, 2001, Mr. Blair addressed the Canadian Parliament and it is a safe assumption that he wrote that speech himself since it reflects most of the themes found in *A Journey*. In his address to Parliament he talked about the importance of bringing peace to Northern Ireland (and praised both in his speech and his book the work of Canadian General John de Chastelain in the decommissioning of arms). He referred to the threats “from terrorism and from the proliferation of nuclear, chemical

and biological weapons.” He emphasized the importance of the transatlantic alliance between the UK and North America “as the rock ultimately on which our security and prosperity is based.” He also talked about his core package of beliefs which he described as:

a common belief in the values of institutionalized democracy, the benefits of the rule of law, the primacy of the market as the engine for growth, the belief in a strong and inclusive society to correct the market’s injustices, the creative power of individualism and the ultimate need to protect human rights.

A lot of his nearly 700 page manuscript is spent delving into these themes.

Two subjects he raises which are of interest to students of government and often overlooked in the reviews of his book thus far were his relationship to parliament and his attitude towards public services. Mr. Blair has had a reputation of never being “a House of Commons man” and it is presumed he would never reply the way Mr. Churchill did when asked what his greatest thrill of life was – “to be referred to as Winston Churchill, M.P.” Yet there is something very Churchillian in how Mr. Blair thinks back about the first time he visited Westminster to meet a sitting member, Tom Pendry. “I walked into the cavernous Central Lobby where the public was to meet their MPs, and I stopped. I was thunderstruck. It just hit me.

This was where I wanted to be... There and then, I had a complete presentiment: here I was going to be. This was my destiny. This was my political home. I was going to do whatever it took to enter it." (p. 34)

Although he admits he hated Prime Minister's Questions – he calls it a "nightmare" (p. 308) with its "confrontations, all messy, all off-putting" (p. 659) – it was fitting that his last act as prime minister was to take one final PMQ at which time he told the House:

Some may belittle politics but we who are engaged in it know that it is where people stand tall. Although I know that it has many harsh contentions, it is still the arena that sets the heart beating a little faster. If it is, on occasions, the place of low skullduggery, it is more often the place for the pursuit of noble causes.(p. 662)

One only wishes he could have expanded on how his parliamentary experience before becoming PM – for example, his committee work – influenced him as well as why he did not complete the second phase of Lords reform after the passage of the House of Lords Act in

1999 which removed the right of all but 92 hereditary peers to sit. Did he just lose interest or did he find the forces opposing further constitutional reform too powerful?

As noted in books like Michael Barber's *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting to Transform Britain's Public Services* (London: Methuen, 2007) which recounts New Labour's achievements in bringing real change to how public services are delivered, clearly one of Mr. Blair's greatest contributions was his support for performance measurement in the delivery of services. While he was proud of his accomplishments in foreign policy, he was equally proud of his success in bringing the concept of getting value for money to the forefront in the provision of services like health care, education and welfare. As he told his public servants, "don't think for an instant that in any other walk of life you would spend these sums of money without demanding a measurable output." And what was perhaps most important he was not prepared to delegate the overseeing of his Delivery Unit to any other minister. He writes:

...Changing public service systems inevitably meant getting into the details of delivery and performance measurement in a radically more granular way.

Increasingly, prime ministers are like CEOs or chairmen of major companies. They have to set a policy direction; they have to see it is followed; they have to get data on whether it is; they have to measure outcomes." (p. 338)

Mr. Blair received monthly notes on the progress of each of his domestic policy priorities as well as six month detailed reports on what key actions were needed to deliver success. His actions as prime minister set an important benchmark in this field for others to follow.

There are many audiences this book is addressed to: parliamentarians, historians, foreign policy specialists, the engaged citizen as well as sitting prime ministers and presidents. All will find it of interest and a valuable contribution to political literature.

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