

OUTRO Renewal

'Weren't the nineties great?'

The failure of the Millennium Dome had done nothing to blunt Tony Blair's sense of destiny. In retrospect the Millennium marked only a moment in time, he observed, in his speech to the Labour Party conference in 2001. 'It was the events of September 11 that marked a turning point in history.' He was speaking some three weeks after the al-Qaeda attacks, and some regretted that the person making such bold claims on the part of history continued to display such a shaky grasp of it himself. He'd already been to New York to express his solidarity with the USA as he remembered how his father's generation had endured the Blitz: 'There was one country and one people that stood by us at that time. That country was America, and the people was the American people.' By the time the USA entered the Second World War, of course, the worst of the Blitz had long since passed, while the former dominions and colonies of the British Empire might have felt slighted by being overlooked yet again.

But his comments went down very well with his hosts, and when George Bush mentioned Blair in an address to both Houses of Congress, the assembled politicians turned to give him a standing ovation. Whatever else resulted, the repercussions of those attacks were to change the public perception of Blair's premiership, both at home and abroad. 'The events of September 11,' wrote Clare Short in 2004, 'seemed to electrify Blair. He had been searching for his legacy. After September 11, he seemed to have found his cause.' In that conference speech Blair mentioned public services in passing, but it sounded like — and was — an afterthought. His real focus was on international affairs, and that was to remain the case.

For much of the rest of the New Labour establishment, however, life carried on as normal. After the 2001 general election victory, it was said, Gordon Brown had visited the prime minister and told him to 'fuck off' so that the alleged Granita agreement could be honoured. The terrorist attacks made no difference. 'In the aftermath of 9/11, Tony rang Gordon to ask for his advice,' reported Jonathan Powell. 'Instead of responding,

Gordon used the call to demand to know when Tony was going to resign. Tony slammed the phone down in a rage.'

Even more characteristic was the response of Jo Moore, a press officer in the Department of Transport, who circulated a memo to her colleagues as the al-Qaeda story broke: 'It's now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury. Councillors' expenses?' Those sixteen words seemed to sum up so much that had gone wrong with politics in Britain, from the instinctive response of seeking party advantage in a tragedy, through the appallingly insensitive language ('a very good day ... bury'), to the bathetic conclusion about a reform to the system of payments to local councillors, revealing a scale of priorities that was breathtaking in its offensiveness and ineptitude.

Moore was no novice in her post. She had worked as a press officer for the Labour Party for years — she had been present in John Smith's flat when he suffered his fatal heart attack — and had served under Blair through his time in opposition. It was not naivety but normality that prompted the memo. Nor was the idea of 'burying bad news' novel. Back in 1995 it had been planned to release the story about Harriet Harman's son going to a selective school on the day that the report of the Scott Inquiry about arms to Iraq was due to be published, although this was scuppered when the news got out ahead of schedule.

When Moore's memo was leaked to the press, it caused outrage and demands for her to be sacked, though no one was much surprised when all that resulted was a brief, scripted apology. Blair 'felt Jo was basically a decent person, very committed and professional, and it was a bit much to destroy her career over one leaked email that she should never have written or sent'. The absence of serious disciplinary action suggested that, despite the transformative effects of al-Qaeda's actions, New Labour planned to continue operating as it had before.

In terms of British politics, the impact of the 11 September attacks was most apparent in relation to Europe. The debate over the single currency was expected to dominate Blair's second term in office. The coins and notes for the euro had been distributed to the banks of the participating nations earlier that same month, and Britain's potential participation seemed to be the most important issue on the domestic agenda. That now disappeared entirely, swallowed up in a rush to war.

The first target was Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda was based and where it ran its training camps. This was expected to be a straightforward operation. 'We thought back then that the equation was relatively simple,' Blair explained in his memoirs: 'knock out the Taliban, give Afghanistan

a UN-supervised election, provide billions for development, and surely the outcome is progress.' The next stage was a return to Iraq to complete unfinished business left over from ten years earlier. At a briefing meeting, barely a week after the World Trade Center had been destroyed, Blair was asked about Iraq. His equivocation led Chris Mullin, who was present, to reflect: 'I take that to mean that a second front, against Iraq, is being considered.' Indeed it was, and more than anything else, the invasion of Iraq two years later, in conjunction with America, was to become the defining issue of Blair's time as prime minister.

The British involvements in Afghanistan and, particularly, in Iraq were to split opinion at home, while the shelving of serious debate on Europe merely postponed an issue that would have to be resolved at some point. But in other areas, the period of just over a decade that separated John Major's arrival in Downing Street from Tony Blair's re-election had already settled much.

Ever since the war the country had swung uncertainly between different, conflicting images of itself. 'Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role,' the former US secretary of state, Dean Acheson, had famously pronounced in 1962, and although his subject had been the global balance of power, the words also resonated in terms of national identity. The question of what a post-imperial Britain might actually be like had underpinned much of the cultural expression of recent decades as well as much of the political posturing.

Culturally there were three sources of influence from overseas: from Europe, which – so long as it was interpreted to mean Tuscany and Provence – shaped the tastes of the liberal section of the establishment; from America, which attracted the enthusiasm of much of the younger working class, to the despair of the left; and from the Commonwealth, a more diffuse source of inspiration but one which also played its part. The balance between these was affected too by the history of Britain itself, and especially by the parts of that history deemed to be of greatest significance by each of the competing political and cultural interests.

For a long time this meant, way ahead of anything else, the Second World War. The myths of the nation standing alone against Nazism, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat at Dunkirk, enduring the Blitz in a spirit of stoicism to which only Britain could aspire – such things were vital to the morale of a country slipping down the international league table. The Empire might be disintegrating, but at least Britain was confident of its place on the moral high ground.

As decline turned to economic, industrial and political crisis in the 1970s, that evaluation came under strain. Immigration from the countries of what was then known as the New Commonwealth helped shape the left's espousal of anti-racism, which in turn led to an increasingly self-flagellating attitude to the Empire and even to the war. 'The British disease, if there is such a thing,' reflected Peter Shore in 1974, 'is gloom about being British.' Set against this was, for a while, Margaret Thatcher's evocation of the spirit of Winston Churchill, following the Falklands War of 1982, as well as an idealised vision of 1950s suburban Britain, seen as a stable, ordered, decent society.

In the 1990s the war continued to play a role in shaping the nation's thinking about itself, but it found ever more trivial expression, whether it were spam fritter-frying contests or tabloid coverage of football matches with Germany. As the number of survivors dwindled, there were few tangible remains for most of Britain to cling to; in 1998 the last remaining bomb-site in the City of London was cleared for development. The war remained a source of fascination, but was becoming irretrievably distant. To commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the declaration of war in 1939, ITV ran a documentary series, *The Second World War in Colour*, collecting newsreels, official footage and home movies all shot in colour; although startling in its freshness, it wasn't enough to overcome decades of seeing the Europe of the 1930s and '40s in period black-and-white.

The battleground instead became the 1960s, a struggle over the meaning of that decade: whether the liberal reforms and rise of personal liberty had been a disaster for traditional morality and social structures, and should be reversed wherever possible, or whether they had set a desirable course towards a more tolerant, happier society, 'a country at ease with itself', to appropriate John Major's phrase. In this debate, it was noticeable how peripheral politics had become. The rehabilitation of the 1960s by Cool Britannia, and the extension into a new mood of tolerant morality, was achieved by the new left of the 1980s when it seized control of the cultural industries; politicians trailed behind, desperately trying to stay in touch.

In that pursuit, even the most surefooted of politicians sometimes misjudged the moment. In the spring of 1999 a neo-Nazi terrorist, David Copeland, planted a series of nail bombs in London, targeting areas with large ethnic minority populations in Brixton and Brick Lane, and a gay pub, the Admiral Duncan in Soho. The first two bombs injured scores of people, while the latter killed three and injured a further seventy-nine. The prime minister's response was not quite as hard-hitting as it might have been. An article under his name appeared in the *Sunday Times*, but in more than a

thousand words, he found room for just one sentence about the murderous attack on the Admiral Duncan.

When the pub reopened two months later, Blair sent a message of support that again seemed reluctant to address the fact that homosexuals were in the firing line for right-wing extremists. It was 'an horrific attack on innocent civilians', he wrote. Some in his own inner circle were distinctly unimpressed. 'At no time did he really address the gay community directly,' regretted Lance Price; 'happy to talk to the majority but even now terrified of speaking to a minority for whom his precious coalition of support has little sympathy. I was genuinely disappointed and even a little surprised.'

The violence of Copeland's short-lived campaign of terror was a reminder that the whole country had yet to be won over to what Blair called 'the tolerant society the overwhelming majority are determined to build'. But Blair was right to say that, despite his own timidity, the majority of the country had ceased to worry too much about what consenting adults did in their spare time.

In 'A Perfectly Simple Explanation', a 1996 episode of *Hamish Macbeth*, we were introduced to Malachai MacBean, an extremist Calvinist minister, the leader of the Church of the Stony Path. 'He could be mad,' shrugs the town's doctor. 'Or then again, he might just be embarked on some kind of Back to Basics campaign. Which would make him mad in my book anyway.' MacBean is counterbalanced by a dope-smoking, BMW-driving, hippy guru named Zoot, with whom we are expected to have more sympathy, until the denouement reveals that MacBean's speaking-in-tongues, fire-and-brimstone act is just a cover to conceal the fact that he and Zoot are deeply in love with each other and having a passionate affair. And life in the picturesque village of Lochdubh continues on its liberal, inclusive way.

That, however, may have distorted the facts on the ground a little. When the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act was up for debate in the Westminster Parliament, a prominent SNP-supporting businessman, Brian Souter, founder of the Stagecoach transport company, ran a privately funded referendum in Scotland in which over a million Scots registered their wish to keep the legislation. The power of the Catholic Church still held more sway north of the border than any church in England. Similarly Northern Ireland — where male homosexuality had only been legalised in 1982 — saw much greater resistance to the liberalising of society.

But even if Tony Blair did lose touch with the public mood, his position remained unassailable thanks to the lingering image of the Conservatives as the nasty party, still refusing to accept that the country had moved on.

In the early days of his leadership, William Hague made strenuous efforts to discard that legacy, espousing 'patriotism without bigotry' and attending the 1997 Gay Pride rally, but as the 2001 election drew closer, and the polls failed to turn his way, he returned to the old themes. 'Talk about Europe and they call you extreme,' he protested in a speech in March 2001. 'Talk about tax and they call you greedy. Talk about crime and they call you reactionary. Talk about asylum and they call you racist. Talk about your nation and they call you Little Englanders.' He went on to suggest that Labour's policies risked turning Britain into 'a foreign land'.

Although his press officers insisted that he was talking about EU encroachments on British sovereignty, and that his speech should in no way be interpreted as being racist or relating to immigration, that was precisely how it was seen. It was difficult to avoid the conclusion that he intended to send such signals, when he was promising to 'clear up Labour's asylum mess'.

A couple of months earlier, the *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee, stung by being singled out by name as part of the 'liberal elite', had responded with a withering assault on the modern Conservative Party: 'Hague is marooned in yesteryear with his shrinking blue-rinse party while we are swimming in the sea of pluralism, multiculturalism, complex families, difficult choices, all the muddle born of freedom.' In short, she argued: 'We liberals are closer to the majority.'

She was right. Just as economic liberalism now shaped the policies of all the major parties, so social liberalism began to shape the country more widely. The rise of the economic liberals and the triumph of the free market in the 1980s had been fought, unsuccessfully, by the left and had split the Labour Party. Now there was a matching rearguard action by those on the right who wished to preserve tradition in all but the economic sphere, and who were prepared to tear at the flesh of the Conservative Party in pursuit of that goal. It was equally unsuccessful. There were areas of dispute about how far liberalism was prepared to tolerate dissident thinking and practices, whether it truly respected the civil liberties of those who rejected its metropolitan bias — which was why hunting with hounds became such a contentious issue — but in broad terms, there had been a remarkable transformation in the country, building over the last three decades, that emerged in triumph in the 1990s.

It wasn't simply the changes themselves, but the fact that change itself had become entrenched as a part of the country's identity. Britain had, until recently, cherished its sense of tradition and continuity. It was a country that could look back on its history as the world's first industrialised nation and

still believe that the essential character of the country had remained intact, undergoing only minor modifications, eschewing the violent upheavals of revolution and therefore able to take most things in its stride.

Partly in consequence of this, the image of the Englishman, in particular, had become probably the most easily recognised national stereotype in the world. A couple of decades earlier, savage caricatures of the type in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* — John Cleese's bowler-hatted bureaucrat, Graham Chapman's eccentric colonel — had exported remarkably well and had helped parody it out of existence. What remained was more likely to be played for a gentler effect, as when Hugh Grant stammered out his emotions through the medium of a Partridge Family song in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Now Britain celebrated both its cultural diversity and, as it began to talk of being the world's first post-industrial nation, its ability to adapt to new circumstances and to reinvent itself. At the start of the decade, there had been a feeling of weariness after a decade of Thatcherite espousal of permanent revolution; now the idea of change had become accepted as the norm.

It was a trend epitomised by Tony Blair himself, a man whose life — Fettes, Oxford, the Bar — was steeped in tradition and the establishment. He'd even been to the same school as both James Bond and the Marvel Comics superhero Captain Britain. Yet his entire appeal as a politician was based on his image as a rootless modern man with no allegiance to the past save for a bit of flag-waving, and even that owed more to the Swinging Sixties than to the Empire.

Blair displayed no respect for tradition or for institutions of any kind, on either a political or a personal level. His doctrine of liberal intervention was launched without consultation with the Foreign Office. He regarded the trade unions, the Labour Party itself, as a block on his vision of progress. Even the armed forces, on whose reputation for efficiency he came to count so heavily, were a source of frustration at times with their allegiance to the past. (Though he was never as crass as Peter Mandelson, who described the Household Division as 'chinless wonders'.)

The same trait was seen in his religious faith. Although Blair didn't officially become a Catholic until after his term in office, he had long been in the habit of receiving communion in a Catholic church until he was told by Cardinal Basil Hume in 1996 that this wasn't appropriate; his tart rejoinder — 'I wonder what Our Lord will make of this' — suggested that he was not yet ready to accept the discipline of Rome. And indeed, when he was eventually received into the Church, there was little sign of humility, as he launched into a criticism of the Pope's teachings on personal morality, particularly on homosexuality and contraception, and suggested that a

new generation shouldn't be stuck in the past: 'We need an attitude of mind where rethinking and the concept of evolving attitudes becomes part of the discipline with which you approach your religious faith.'

Blair was entirely serious about the 'modernity' of which he spoke so often, though ironically he was, in the 1990s at least, widely seen as an opportunist. His immense gifts as a political salesman meant that when he attempted to sell his vision — with all the soundbites and slogans, from 'tough on crime' onwards — he conveyed little more than the sincerity and depth of an advertiser, since the substance needed to support the strapliness was so rarely in evidence. It was a problem that came in large part from the recent history of the Labour Party, and its disastrous electoral performance; such a premium was placed on winning that little energy was left for thoughts of governing. Bryan Gould's assessment of Peter Mandelson served equally as a summation of Blair: 'He was always disappointing as someone who is said to be a visionary for the Labour Party. He had a vision of how Labour could win an election, but not too much idea of how to change society.'

There was a further irony here. Such vision was lacking partly because New Labour had so deliberately distanced itself from the movement that had given it birth. It was possible to find a way of articulating John Prescott's ambition of 'traditional values in a modern setting', but New Labour hadn't done so, instead choosing the path of least resistance wherever possible. Most noticeably, Blair had trumpeted the need to reform public services, but had signally failed to deliver. The default position of the left — that any change to the status quo was to be resisted — remained in place. Spending rose, the infrastructure was substantially rebuilt and outcomes improved (though not in proportion to the increased funding), but the health and education services continued to produce less impressive results than their continental counterparts, and the moment passed when it would have been possible to revitalise the welfare state at a time of steady economic growth. Instead New Labour took up the Conservative cause of setting targets and passing legislation as though these could achieve change on their own. And when those endeavours proved unsuccessful, Blair's interest seemed to wander away from the home front and onto the world stage.

As it did so, he fell out of step with the public that he had sought to represent. The changes in Britain in the last decades had been profound, so much so that they inevitably left little scope for a true internationalism at this stage. The reinvention of the 1990s was essentially inward-looking, a country putting its own house in order, without a great deal of reference to the outside world. This too was new. Britain's traditional image of itself had been grounded in a moral certainty, a sense of destiny that sought to

remake the world in its own image, exporting its own values — including a judicial system, a civil service, a regimental structure, a codified concept of sport — in a belief that it was on a civilising mission. The Second World War, and 1940 in particular, had been so significant because it could be seen as the culmination of that characteristic; in the words of Winston Churchill's 'finest hour' speech, it had been about 'the survival of Christian civilisation' at a time when failure would mean that 'the whole world will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age'.

Blair's wish to impose liberal democracy on the world's trouble spots was an extension of that faith, but it was either a pale echo of a vanished age or, perhaps, was simply too early a rebirth. The relocation of the nation's creation myth to the 1960s replaced crusading with creativity, and high-minded idealism with a messy democracy. It was enough to be getting on with.

Blair, for all his belief that he was in tune with the zeitgeist, missed much of this. During Cool Britannia's Sixties-revivalism phase, he could participate happily enough, while his class-transcending image allowed him to navigate the wake of Diana's death with impressive confidence. But he missed a crucial development. Underneath his pose as 'a pretty straight guy', he, just as much as William Hague, was still inherently a believer in the power of a liberal elite, of the kind that had led the reforms of the 1960s. He hadn't recognised that liberalism — both economic and social — had brought into being a new movement, demanding equality initially in terms of culture, with the possibility that it might extend into the political sphere.

Blair deluded himself that he was a leader, when actually he was following. When he ceased to do that convincingly, the electorate turned away from him. There was no decisive moment of rejection, as there had been with Major, just a slow waning of attention, as seen in the victory of the don't knows at the 2001 election, a phenomenon that was repeated in 2005, when an even smaller proportion of the electorate gave Labour its support and the gap between the abstentions and the government's vote grew still greater. While the economy was still buoyant, and times were still good, the cracks could be papered over. But there were real tensions building between a political class that sought to gather more powers to itself, and a democratic impulse that was losing faith in politicians altogether.

And still there was the ever-widening gulf between the rich and the rest. Despite all Gordon Brown's tax credit schemes, wage inequality was reported to be at its greatest since records began, which in this instance turned out to be the 1880s. Some feared that Brown's measures even

risked entrenching such divisions, that by facilitating low wages with state subsidy (in pursuit of what politicians of both parties liked to call a flexible economy), any hope of progress was being choked off. But there were many more, certainly within the Labour Party, who hoped fervently that the policy would work, clinging to the belief that the socialism-by-stealth of redistribution would lead to a fairer, more equal society. At the time of the 2001 election, after just four years, it was still too early to draw any conclusions about the impact, about whether the social problems grouped together under the umbrella of 'the underclass' were any nearer to being resolved. All that could be said was that, in economic terms, Britain was no closer to being a classless society.

But then this was a government that said it no longer believed in class. In 1998 it announced the creation of a new measure of social classification, replacing the old six-band system with seventeen categories, a move heralded in the press as a recognition that 'We are all middle class now.' But under the more familiar distinctions, where the working class were defined as socio-economic groups C2, D and E, there were around twenty-two million members of this supposedly endangered sector of the population at the end of the 1990s. Even in the exciting new world of technology, most of the jobs created were low-paid and low-skilled; the rise of the call centre merely provided a modern twist on the sweatshop. The reality was still a country deeply divided by class: working hours were longer in Britain than in any of its EU partners, while chief executives' pay was higher. Labour's rhetoric in opposition about fat cats didn't seem to have made much impact.

As the leadership of both major parties became ever more homogenised, vast parts of the electorate were going unrepresented. This was particularly noticeable on the Labour benches. 'Labour has changed, with just 13 per cent of our MPs from skilled manual backgrounds,' noted Ken Jackson, general secretary of the AEEU, in 1999. 'Barristers, academics and doctors have taken their place. Parliament is fast becoming the preserve of the professional.' Unskilled workers were even thinner on the ground.

'We are citizens proud to say that there is such a thing as society and proud to be part of it,' declared Blair in 1999. 'Yet today we feel our social fabric torn.' It was the same tune that he had been playing since his speech on the murder of James Bulger, and the core beliefs it expressed were not very different from those of John Major. Yet what might have been true at the start of the decade was not necessarily the case now. There were still deep, underlying problems — as there always would be — but mostly Britain had come to terms with its new role as a messy, muddled collection of peoples, united only by a lack of unity, by a desire to avoid causing too

much offence to anyone else and by a rapidly declining interest in the country's history. If the social fabric remained threadbare, it had at least been patched up. In any event, what was much more striking was that the political fabric was torn.

In 1992 Margaret Thatcher had insisted in an interview that nothing had changed since her departure from office. 'There isn't such a thing as Majorism,' she had said. 'Thatcherism will live. It will live long after Thatcher has died, because we had the courage to restore the great principles and put them into practice.' Thatcherism had indeed transformed much of the nation, but it had left the job unfinished, unable to extend economic liberalism into its social expression. That was completed during the years of Blairism. But neither John Major nor Tony Blair really made the difference. Both had sought to create a classless society, both had failed, with wealth inequality increasing and social mobility decreasing, and both found themselves ill at ease with the kind of classless culture that emerged instead.

Their vision of classlessness had essentially been — as had Thatcher's — a wish to create a meritocracy. And meritocracy, of course, is merely another form of elitism, albeit one that claims to be based on a supposedly natural, rather than an inherited, hierarchy. The dominant strand of culture that emerged in the 1990s, on the other hand, was very clearly anti-elitist, as expressed through the National Lottery, reality television, the internet and the celebration of Princess Diana and David Beckham.

During Blair's second term, as he busied himself waging war on the peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq, there emerged the figure of Jade Goody, star of the third series of *Big Brother*. A dental nurse from Essex, roundly ridiculed in the press for her ignorance of the world, her stupidity and her vulgarity, she became rich and famous because she represented a huge swathe of British society that had hitherto been denied a voice in the mainstream media. Her death in 2009, at the age of twenty-seven, prompted a change in NHS policy on cervical cancer screening and attracted tributes from the new prime minister (Gordon Brown having finally made it to the job he had craved for so long). Goody's status in the popular consciousness was a direct result of trends in the 1990s that had little or nothing to do with the politicians of the decade.

For in their own ways both John Major and Tony Blair had proved unable to impose themselves on society or to control the forces that were reshaping Britain, as anti-establishment feelings eroded much of the authority and legitimacy they would have wished to claim for themselves. As Norman Lamont might have said, they had between them spent the decade in office, but not in power.