



THE LION IN WINTERⁱ

*"This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden ...
This happy breed of men,
this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea ...
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England."*

King Richard II, Act 2, Scene 1



Comdt Rory Finegan writes on the challenges facing British foreign policy in the aftermath of Gordon Brown's accession to Prime Minister and ongoing military engagements overseas.

With the succession of Gordon Brown as both leader of the Labour Party and Prime Minister of the UK bringing to an end the Blair 'era,' our nearest neighbour stands at a crossroads both domestically and internationally. While Britain is no longer a great imperial power where upon once the sun never set, it still remains a highly influential nation, not only within the European Union but also geopolitically on the world stage. The Irish American playwright Eugene O'Neill, in his play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, wrote in the words of the character Mary Tyrone, "the past is the present, isn't it? It's the future too," and no examination of Britain today can look to the future without examining the legacy of Tony Blair. The historian Richard English argues that, in electoral terms, Blair is guaranteed a benign historical verdict, having led the Labour Party to three successive general election victories - but he makes the qualification that his broader achievements and legacy are both more complex and uncertain. Arguably, to disappoint was always going to be Blair's fate, no matter how successful he was.

Above: The Commons faces a period of profound change following the end of Tony Blair's tenure as Prime Minister.

The Blair Years

In 1997, it did indeed seem that the opportunities were immense and that Britain, after the divisive years of the Thatcher era, was entering a new epoch. When Blair took over the Labour Party in 1994, it was already some 20 percent ahead in the opinion polls and already likely to win the next general election. In 1997, Blair was blessed with a strong economy; Brussels and the European capitals looked to the young dynamic PM to move Britain away from its traditional euro-sceptic stance and become the new dynamo at the heart of the European project. He also inherited a party that had travelled down a long, sometimes bitter, road towards self-reinvention and modernisation. In a sense, few, including Blair, would ever have envisaged that his premiership would ultimately be 'book-ended' by two conflicts: one ancient, Northern Ireland; and one modern, the crucible that has become Iraq; which would both shape his premiership and inform his legacy.

Yet, as Frank Millar of the *Irish Times* has noted, it was a truly remarkable moment, despite 10 years of sometimes overblown hyperbole, when on May 5th 2007, Blair, accompanied by the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, watched Dr. Ian Paisley and Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness assume office as First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern

Ireland. There were many others who had proverbially sweated blood and tears over the years; who can forget Seamus Mallon's quip that the Good Friday Agreement had been "Sunningdale for slow learners"; but, that said, there would never have been the necessary 'engagement' with Unionism at all had Blair not first abandoned his own party's traditional commitment to Irish unification with consent. The Prime Minister would be mocked mercilessly after first feeling the 'hand of history' during an emergency dash to Northern Ireland in April 1998.¹¹ But this was classic Blair; oblivious to ridicule and concentrating on the big picture.

In delivering the transformation that has taken place in Northern Ireland, aided and abetted by many others, not least Bertie Ahern, this British Prime Minister really did make history in Ireland. For unlike devolution in Wales and Scotland, in Northern Ireland Tony Blair did indeed have a large amount to do with what remarkably occurred. Bertie Ahern noted that "Blair never lost interest" and added that, after 10 years of Mr. Blair, the relationship between the governments is "now on a different level" to anything ever experienced before. A telling remark

considering that the era of megaphone diplomacy between the two islands is not in the distant past.

Rule Britannia?

What of the wider geopolitical world stage? Despite limited foreign policy experience or knowledge, he rose rapidly to the status of a key world leader. The Conservative foreign policy that Blair inherited was characterised by a realist orthodoxy based on a strong Thatcherite conception of nationhood and sovereignty. This was perhaps logical in the circumstances of the Cold War, but came under increasing pressure with the rubric cube of ethnic and nationalist tensions that cascaded from the fall of the Iron Curtain and the unravelling of the Soviet empire. However, it failed to offer a paradigm to deal with globalisation and all its by-products, such as the rise of the Asian economic tigers. In Europe, the political tectonic plates had also imperceptibly shifted, where in an enlarging Europe the lance of influence had shifted away from the traditional Franco-German-British triangle. Stanley Hoffmann has characterised this period as "the crisis of liberal internationalism."

Equally, the transatlantic bridge between the US and Europe, that most Conservative leaders felt that they naturally represented, was becoming more difficult to manage. Blair himself defined the foreign policy approach that he inherited as a doctrine of "benign inactivity... the product of the conventional view of foreign policy since the fall of the Berlin Wall." Blair's new foreign policy doctrine was unveiled at the Chicago Economic Club in 1999, much influenced by the military historian Lawrence Freedman. It was a radical departure from the self-interested realpolitik that had traditionally driven British politics

Below: Former PM Blair with British Forces' in Kosovo in 1999.

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to one driven by perceived defining issues. The first pillar of this was that foreign policy should fundamentally concern values, based on the belief that globalised interdependence was the new gravitational fulcrum around which international relations were now based - ergo "idealism becomes realpolitik" in Blair's own words. In this construct, 'soft' power (information, culture, and the tenets of economic liberalism) is the ability to project Britain's values into other societies. But critically the world is not a benign environment; values have to be fought for, if necessary, by the application of hard power - the kinetic option.

The second pillar of this policy was that power projection had to be exercised in a 'holistic' manner. Traditional foreign policy had clearly demarcated soft versus hard power; Blair believed they were two sides of the same coin, thus Britain's use of its military forces for fighting, policing, training and diplomacy could be as much a policy instrument in the developing world as foreign aid. Here was Blair's vision of a brave new world in which a "doctrine of international community" would allow for morally guided military interventions. Indeed, as his doctrine developed and mutated, Blair sent British soldiers into battle five times in six years: in Iraq to support then president Bill Clinton's Operation Desert Fox bombing campaign in 1998; Kosovo in 1999; Sierra Leone in 2000; Afghanistan in 2001; and, most fatefully, Iraq in 2003. Michael Clarke, Professor of Defence Studies at King's College London, argued that within this construct is a world in which there is a clash, not between civilisations, but rather about civilisation; the fundamental question being about the willingness to embrace a liberal democratic capitalist world order on a globalised scale. The corollary from this perspective was that non-involvement or disengagement equates to a simple failure to recognise genuine national interest.

The final pillar of this trilogy was a distillation of just what was at stake in these foreign policy choices that must be made. International institutions such as the UN had not proved adaptive enough to cope with the new challenges. Collective national power needed to be harnessed to drive the necessary changes. It perceived a struggle between progressive forces and those of reaction and autocracy, and the jihadist threat embodied this. The three cords of this foreign policy vision were intertwined in a policy approach that became known as "liberal interventionism" as articulated in the Chicago speech of 1999, and it was this policy, initially aspirational, that morphed into doctrine as enunciated in the Strategic Defence Review, that "we must be prepared to go to the crisis, rather than have the crisis come to us." ⁱⁱⁱ

The tools to achieve this were explicit leadership and, from the lexicon of geopolitics, 'positioning.' Leadership evolved and developed through intensive engagement at summits, with the UN and a whirlwind of bilateral diplomacy. The latter, 'positioning', translated as staying intrinsically close to the United States while also shaping a new European agenda. The St. Malo summit of 1998 saw him agree with France's Chirac the launch of a new European security and defence relationship and was presented by pundits as something of a seismic shift for Britain in relation to its commitment and engagement

towards European security. Critically however, Blair was not trying to create a European defence entity as an alternative to the US or NATO, but rather to ensure against the US failing to meet its obligations to European security - almost a European strategic reserve.

Britain also saw this as the metaphorical bridge through which to achieve a synergy and integration between Atlanticism and Europeanism. America being put at the top of this 'positioning' agenda may explain the extraordinary close relationship that Blair sought with the US, almost regardless of the direction of American policy, through thick and thin. Even during the Lebanon War of 2006, Britain, almost alone amongst the European states, pointedly refused to criticise US policy in the region.

The Tip of the Spear

How did this translate into defence policy and operational deployments for the British Armed Forces? Speaking at Plymouth in January 2007, Tony Blair argued that there were two types of nations amongst Britain's allies: "those who do war fighting and peacekeeping and those who have effectively, except in the most exceptional circumstances, retreated to peacekeeping alone." When considered by the European audience, most telling is what was implied rather than what was expressed.

Focusing on the EU in this way takes up the themes set out several years ago by Robert Kagan in his celebrated essay 'Of Paradise and Power', in which he defined a post-modern Europe as a 'Venus' relying on soft power, compared to the still modernist US 'Mars' relying on its global military dominance. The military historian Laurence Freedman has posited that the frequency with which Blair sent Britain's armed forces into battle became one of the defining features of his premiership. The issue of when to commit troops to battle, not only the operational argument but the morale imperative underlying same, in itself thus became one of the central issues of foreign policy and has dominated debate even now on the subject. ^{iv} In this light, the Plymouth speech takes on a different nuance. At the heart of the debate was the issue as to whether Britain should be activist and internationalist, or passive and insular. The Plymouth speech aboard HMS Albion in this light can be seen as a valedictory address,

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all but reprising his famous Chicago speech, albeit with a stronger emphasis on security. “What happens in the Middle East affects us. What happens in Pakistan, or Indonesia, or in the attenuated struggles for territory and supremacy in Africa for example, in Sudan or Somalia affects us – the new frontiers for our security are global. Our armed forces will be deployed in the lands of other nations far from home, with no immediate threat to our territory, in environments and in ways unfamiliar to them.” He added in conclusion “my choice is for a British foreign policy that keeps our American alliance strong and is prepared to project hard as well as soft power; and for us as a nation to be as willing to fight terrorism and pay the cost of that fight wherever it may be.”

The Hand of History?

What is his legacy? While Iraq casts a long shadow, Blair’s foreign affairs legacy undoubtedly includes some positives. His success in Northern Ireland saw a level of engagement and commitment by a British PM not seen since Gladstone. He took huge risks and they paid off. While the Northern Ireland peace process will always be a work in progress, it would be moribund without his commitment. His work on climate change flew in the face of Washington, but helped push the issue to the fore of the international agenda. Likewise, the Blair government received deserved praise for its approach and results on African policy. Early pledges to put Britain “at the heart of Europe” raised high hopes that Blair would be the most pro-European Prime Minister Britain had ever seen. Many expected him, as a champion of European enlargement, to also guide Britain into the single currency, a possibility firmly resisted by Gordon Brown. The Chancellor carved out a measure of autonomy hardly ever achieved by a Minister; indeed certain Departments were regarded as Brown preserves. Brown unilaterally took control of entry to the euro (“our destiny” according to Blair), by announcing that it would be an economic decision. His aspirations in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were to founder, his silence and complicit role in the 2006 war, where he pointedly refused to criticise the Israeli air campaign in Southern Lebanon that caused huge collateral damage and

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massive disruption to a fragile democracy’s infrastructure, was deafening in its silence. In effect he shoehorned British foreign policy in the region to the step and tune of the US. How can one forget the “Yo Blair,” at the height of the crisis? Ultimately Blair and Bush were fighting different wars. For Blair, Iraq was about upholding values and the will of the international community; for Bush it was a demonstration of raw power to achieve a national purpose.

A report from the respected think-tank Chatham House in assessing British foreign policy since Labour took power in 1997, is extraordinarily blunt “Despite a number of successes especially in his first term, Tony Blair’s time in office will be overshadowed by the disaster of Iraq.” Furthermore, many argue that the much vaunted special relationship with Washington was a chimera. In 2006, US State Department official Kendall Myers described the relationship as one sided; “There never really was a special relationship, or at least not one we’ve noticed. We typically ignore them and take no notice.”

Striding forward: British foreign policy has had the successes of Kosovo and Sierra Leone and the problems of Iraq and Afghanistan in the past decade.

Shoulder to Shoulder

9/11 was an epiphany for Blair. It reinforced his interventionist convictions but also brought him even closer to the Bush administration and the Manichean worldview of President Bush’s ‘war on terror’. It changed fundamentally his relationship with the US and the wider defence debate. Heretofore humanitarian

interventions, such as Sierra Leone, appeared as discretionary wars of choice; Islamic terrorism had created a new strategic imperative, which now drew Western powers into any part of the world where such groups had appeared to acquire a foothold. Despite nods in the direction of European and other partnerships, the reaffirmation of his belief that it has been 'profoundly' in British interests to "stand shoulder to shoulder with America" since 9/11 has been a defining motif of his tenure. This shared insistence that combating global terrorism is at the root of the Middle East's ills has effectively sidelined any meaningful discussion about cause and effect in the increasing violence besetting the Middle East since the Iraq intervention.

For those, like the British Army, preoccupied with the continuing engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the absence of any discernible parameters for British interests, as distinct from US interests, in either conflict has been evident for some time. Dr Claire Spencer, head of the Middle East programme at Chatham House, argues that despite official insistence on terrorism's global reach and growing evidence from the UK Security Service, MI5, that the Al Qaeda network is behind 30 or more terrorist plots uncovered in the UK, the government paradoxically continues to disallow any discussion of a link between the country's role in Iraq and the rising terrorist threat at home. Completely absent, ironically, is the very complex yet nuanced strategy that the UK brought to bear on the Northern Ireland conflict, where there was a long and well documented history of the tactical and strategic use of violence by insurgents and movements reacting to a set of specific, differentiated and concrete political realities. Indeed, parallels between the national demands of Palestinians and the long British experience of Irish terrorism are simply dismissed. Having forged a relationship with Bill Clinton, which bonded over the Northern Ireland peace process, Blair's relationship with his successor has proved one of the most contentious

elements of his foreign policy. His belief that Britain's interests were best served by allying itself at all costs with the Bush administration was to lose him support both at home and abroad.

If Enoch Powell's dictum is generally correct, that all political careers end in failure, then the legacy of the Iraq debacle, if nothing else, must have given Tony Blair pause for thought as he departed No. 10. History may judge that Iraq was indeed 'Blair's Suez' and that in turning his back on Europe in favour of the American alliance and the Bush led neo-conservative adventure to seek global and domestic security by spreading democracy through Iraq across the Middle East, he took the sheen from what could have been one of the great premierships in the history of UK politics. From a European perspective, in his closeness to Bush, Blair damaged Britain's relations with Germany and France and ruined his hopes of acting as a bridge between the EU and the US. One general policy aim that was achieved was that the UK came to be seen as a more 'normal' EU Member State rather than as an awkward partner during the Conservative era, but Blair cannot be said to have succeeded in his aim of elevating Britain into a



Left: George Bush and Gordon Brown meeting in Washington DC. Gordon Brown has vowed to maintain the "special relationship" with the US.

consistent leadership role within the EU. The engagement was constructive, but stopped short of participating in the major European flagship project of the last ten years: the single currency. While he appeared as the European Dr. Jekyll, it was the Atlanticist of his Dr. Hyde alter ego that always remained to the fore and indeed he never reconciled this inherent dilemma.

Blair's complex legacy unquestionably includes many positive achievements, Northern Ireland pre-eminent among them; but in the words of the editor of Blair's Britain 1997 – 2007, Anthony Seldon, "Blair should be seen in history as Labour's most successful party leader... But for the Iraq war, he might have been considered one of the great prime ministers." ^v

The Brown Supremacy

Gordon Brown is now the occupant of No. 10, having succeeded Tony Blair in what ultimately became the longest running palace coup in British politics. The 'TBGB's' of their brilliantly successful but explosive and often tortured relationship, have been well chronicled through the years. 'Irn Broom' Brown, with his oft quoted "prudence, prudence, prudence", must now lay out his stall beyond the shores of Britain. Blair may have ruled in Presidential style for ten years yet, suddenly, it's as if he was never there. But he must choose his preferred European role for Britain between three available options yet to be determined: an awkward partner as per Thatcher; a pragmatic player as was Blair; or a leadership role which Blair ultimately failed to achieve.

In his first address to the traditional Lord Mayor's banquet as PM - this occasion is often used as a launching pad for statements of intent - Brown affirmed his life-long admiration for America. He declared, "I have no truck with anti-Americanism in Britain or elsewhere in Europe and I believe that our ties with America – founded on values we share – constitute our most important bilateral relationship." The often stormy relationship that endured between Brown and Blair represented one of the most extraordinary duets in British political history which, when the two worked in harmony, could be a whirlwind force for change – almost akin to a two man revolutionary cell within the Labour Party. Their relationship was at

best strained, where the Chancellor was famed for often refusing to tell Blair what was in his budget statements. Indeed Brown exercised his muscle throughout Whitehall, earning a reputation as a "control freak" and bully. Frank Millar, London editor of the Irish Times, contends that this is the perception across Europe, where he acquired a reputation for being arrogant, aloof and abrasive. It is envisaged that on economic policies he would hope to see an EU evolution towards his neoliberal position, and he has the opportunity to create a new relationship with France and Germany under Sárközy and Merkel.

Brown may have it relatively easy over Iraq, where in effect a tactical withdrawal of British troops has already taken place in Basra. For the armed forces, the Iraq campaign was frustrating but not calamitous - yet the Shiite south was less challenging than the cauldron of the Sunni triangle around Baghdad and, despite publicly stated policy, the British did little to either confront the local militias or shape local politics. In fact, Basra, long regarded as one of the most cosmopolitan of Iraqi cities, has now spawned hydra like multiple mafia-type militias who have thrived in the power vacuum.

Equally, Brown is not compelled to have the same relationship with George Bush as his predecessor, partially because the President is now tagged by many as a lame duck in the autumn of his term. However, Afghanistan represents a huge and seemingly growing British military commitment. Killed in action has passed the symbolic 100 mark. Indeed this was the principal driver for the British army to begin a withdrawal from Iraq, which by 2009 will only see a handful of advisors and trainers remaining in Basra. While a relatively small British force has conducted a brilliant tactical campaign in Helmand Province in Afghanistan, there still remains an apparently inexhaustible supply of recruits for the Taliban, many training in the remote border regions of an increasingly fragile Pakistan. The British have been increasingly frustrated by what they see as the lack of American effort into Afghan reconstruction, as opposed to chasing remnants of al-Qaeda in and around the Pakistan border. Here again the British felt that their patient efforts in winning hearts and minds were often undermined by US Special Forces who caused needless collateral damage, thereby further alienating the local population.

Even more worrying from a domestic perspective, the threat of homegrown terrorism and extremism can also be traced to Pakistan. One of the key, narrowly won, battlegrounds for Gordon Brown was the recent controversial extension to custody of 42 days under which terrorist suspects can be held, because even a bolstered MI5 is feeling the strain of the vast surveillance operation required to keep tabs on British nationals suspected of terrorist links.^{vi} These investigations are increasingly complex in dealing with ever more sophisticated conspiracies in a globalised world. But the real elephant in the room remains Iran and its nuclear ambitions. The Atlanticist in Brown makes him a willing partner of the US in many economic and security projects. A change in the US administration in November will not necessarily remove the military option to halt Iran's nuclear march, rather than relying on EU soft diplomacy. Brown will then find himself on the bank of his own lonely Rubicon. Ironically it could test Brown even more than Iraq tested Blair. It is in this context that we may discover if there is anything 'new' about the Brown government.

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Top: Tony Blair

Bottom: Gordon Brown

Footnotes:

i. The *Lion in Winter* (1968) adaptation of James Goldman’s play, with Peter O’Toole as Henry II & Katherine Hepburn as Eleanor of Aquitaine, also starred Anthony Hopkins as a ‘sexually’ confused Richard the Lionheart.

ii. “Now is not the time for sound bites, we can leave those at home. I feel the hand of history upon our shoulders.”

iii. In July 1998, when introducing the Strategic Defence Review, Defence Secretary George Robertson argued that armed forces should be geared not only to defending human rights but also to discharging international responsibilities. At the core of the “ethical dimension” to foreign policy, proclaimed by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, was a commitment to human rights.

iv. The complexities of irregular and asymmetrical warfare have produced their own stresses and strains for the British Army, with lessons for the Defence Forces in light of Liberia, the mission to Chad and possible future deployments. Instant communications and a global media have meant that any lapses in discipline (eg. the “You Tube” incident from Liberia), possible mistreatment of prisoners, or just the harsher aspects of modern soldiering were soon likely to be shared and exposed. John Reid as Defence Secretary spoke of the “virtual battleground,” with the attendant microscopic analysis of behaviour that this made possible, combined with the exaggerated role being played by Human rights legislation in assessing the conduct of troops and potential enemies happy to exploit this, while themselves rejecting all norms and conventions. Reid referred to this as the “uneven field of scrutiny.”

v. For a superb series of essays by some of Britain’s leading academics and political commentators see “Blair’s Britain 1997 – 2007,” edited by Anthony Seldon (Cambridge University Press 2007).

vi. At time of writing Browne’s government is under stress on several fronts. Five former Chiefs of Defence Staff, now members of the House of Lords, effectively ambushed him while he was on a visit to Africa, whereby they castigated him in his former role of Chancellor of the Exchequer for what they viewed as the lack of resources and investment in the Armed Forces. Also, the so called ‘discgate’ affair saw the loss of the personal details of some 25 million people, when the disc containing the data was quite literally lost in the post. To compound issues the Labour Party was also embroiled in an electoral funding controversy (a developer David Abrahams, using proxies to conceal his identity) that resulted in the Labour General Secretary losing his job and saw Deputy Leader Harriet Harman come under the spotlight. Other unrelated issues included the revelation of thousands of illegal immigrants working in the security industry and the run on the Northern Rock bank. Also, a fractured Labour Party organisation in Scotland at odds and adrift as to how to deal with a resurgent SNP and the holding of a referendum to determine Scottish independence.