The Historic Legacy of Tony Blair

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Vernon Bogdanor

Every hero, Emerson once said, becomes a bore at last. The Blair era, an era of unparalleled success for the Labor Party that began so triumphantly in 1997, is now moving, inexorably, toward its close. Electorally, Prime Minister Tony Blair has been by far the most successful leader that Labor has ever had, the only one to have won three consecutive elections, two of them with landslide majorities. In fact, he has had a longer continuous run in office than any prime minister since the Napoleonic wars, with the sole exception of Margaret Thatcher.

Moreover, Blair has led the most successful left-of-center government in Europe. Of the three leaders who shared the new dawn of social democracy in the late 1990s, only he survives; both Lionel Jospin, the former French prime minister, and Gerhard Schröder, the former German chancellor, have departed in ignominy, almost forgotten figures. Yet, despite all this, Blair’s current reputation is low, and recent allegations that honors have been given in return for party contributions have not helped. Indeed, survey evidence suggests he is now the most unpopular prime minister since opinion polls began.

This is unlikely to prove the final verdict of history. The twilight of a prime ministership, or of a presidency for that matter, is not the best vantage point from which to analyze its significance. In the United States, for example, the reputations of Harry Truman and Gerald Ford were low when those men left office, but have risen steadily since. Ultimately, Blair’s tenure of leadership will be remembered for three things: for his reforms of British public services; for a wide-ranging set of constitutional reforms, most of which occurred between 1997 and 2001; and, finally, for the war in Iraq.

The Third Way Taken

Constitutional reform occupied much of Blair’s first term. The second term, which ran from 2001 to 2005, was dominated by public service reform and by the war in Iraq. Both of these involved bold if unpopular decisions. Both alienated Blair from his party. Public service reform, however, is likely to be accepted both by the British people and by the Labor Party—in contrast with the Iraq War, which is in the process of being repudiated by both.

Before coming to office, Blair modernized the Labor Party, much as Bill Clinton did America’s Democrats. Blair transformed Old Labor into New Labor, removing the commitment in the party’s constitution to the nationalization of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. Indeed, the 1997 general election was the first since Labor became a national party in which nationalization was not an issue. In the place of traditional Labor bromides, Blair touted a “Third Way” between old-fashioned socialism and unfettered capitalism. Tony Giddens, a leading theorist of the Third Way, has argued that Blair was successful because he understood that changes in society, such as the decline of the working class, globalization, and the growth of a knowledge-based economy, had rendered old-style social democracy irrelevant.

Until Blair, Labor had been imprisoned in an old pattern of mind according to which the public sector was inherently good and the private inherently bad. New Labor seeks to escape this crude dichotomy. The essence of New Labor is that public services, if they are to improve, need to use the techniques of private business and the market to increase efficiency. Injections of new money into government programs, therefore, should be dependent on reform.

Moreover, the state should no longer be expected to be the sole provider of public services. Thus, while public schooling and health care under the National Health Service remain free, the business sector is being encouraged to finance new schools—City Academies—for the state sector, particularly in blighted inner cities; and Foundation Hospitals are being allowed, and indeed encouraged, to establish contracts with private bodies to improve their services.

These changes are likely to prove permanent. They go with the grain of British opinion. Most voters are nonideological. They care little whether schools or hospitals are financed privately or publicly so long as their children learn to read and write and medical operations are carried out speedily and effectively.
Thus, while it is possible that the balance between public and private provision will alter with time, no future government of the left is likely to abandon City Academies or Foundation Hospitals. Here, too, there are perhaps parallels with the reforms in America by Clinton and others who sought to modernize the Democratic Party.

Public service issues are, for most British voters, the most important issues, the ones on which they judge the government of the day. The chances of success for the next prime minister, therefore, largely depend on the skill with which he continues public service reforms. But continued reform will be difficult, since public finances will have to be operated on a more stringent basis than has hitherto been the case, because the rate of economic growth is slowing. Moreover, Blair’s likely successor, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, is widely thought to be less sympathetic to major public service reform than Blair. (The prime minister has expressed regret with himself for not pressing for more radical change.)

In addition, Brown will face a rejuvenated Conservative Party, under its new leader, David Cameron, who argues that the Conservatives are better equipped to continue the process of reforming public services than is a party of the left that has to struggle to persuade trade unions to accept a role for the private sector. The question of which party is better placed to manage public services will be the key issue of British politics in the post-Blair era.

The New Constitution

Britain now has a new constitution, the result of some very radical reforms implemented since Labor came to power in 1997—and this represents a second enduring achievement of Blair. The reforms include a series of referendums and measures devolving more political authority to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, in effect putting the non-English parts of the United Kingdom into a quasi-federal relationship with Westminster. Scotland and Wales now have directly elected legislatures. Northern Ireland has one as well, though it is currently in abeyance. Proportional representation in elections has been introduced for these devolved bodies, for a new London authority, and for elections to the European Parliament.

London, for the first time in British history, has a directly elected mayor, following a referendum. Other local authorities have been required to adopt cabinet systems of government, while a few have directly elected mayors following referendums. Today, 5 percent of registered voters can require a local authority to hold a referendum on the mayor option. The ballot initiative is a political instrument familiar in the United States, but this is the first statutory provision for its use in Britain.

The Human Rights Act of 1998 requires public bodies to comply with the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights, allowing judges to declare a British statute incompatible with the Convention and providing a fast-track procedure for Parliament to amend or repeal such a statute. This comes near to providing Britain with a bill of rights. In addition, the Freedom of Information Act of 2000 provides, for the first time in British history, a statutory right to freedom of information, subject to certain important exemptions.

The Political Parties, Elections, and Referendums Act of 2000 requires the registration of parties and places controls on political donations and national campaign expenditures. It also provides for the establishment of an Electoral Commission to oversee elections and to advise on improvements in electoral procedures. This act brings political parties, for the first time, within the framework of British law. Previously, they had been treated, for the purposes of the law, as voluntary organizations, like golf or tennis clubs.

The House of Lords Act of 1999 has removed all but 92 of the hereditary peers from the House of Lords, as the first phase of a wider reform of that body. The Constitutional Reform Act of 2005 has restructured the historic office of Lord Chancellor, establishing a new Supreme Court and removing its judges from the House of Lords. The head of the judiciary will now be the Lord Chief Justice, not the Lord Chancellor, and the Lord Chancellor will no longer be the Speaker of the House of Lords. Instead, the House of Lords chooses its own Lord Speaker. All this goes toward creating a system of separation of powers in Britain. Before this act, the role of the Lord Chancellor was a standing contradiction to the separation of powers, since he was, at the same time, head of the judiciary, Speaker of the Lords, and a cabinet minister. Now the first two of these positions have been devolved to others.

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Some of the constitutional changes of the past decade (including the Bank of England’s new independence in the setting of monetary policy) make the British system of government more like the American—though, of course, they remain fundamentally different, since Britain is still a parliamentary system while the United States has a presidential system. Almost any one of these reforms, taken singly, would constitute a radical change. Taken together, they allow us to label the years since 1997 a historic era of constitutional reform. Indeed, these years bear comparison with two previous periods of constitutional revision in Britain: (1) the 1830s, the era of the Great Reform Act; and (2) the years immediately preceding the First World War, which saw the passage of the Parliament Act of 1911, restricting the powers of the House of Lords; and the abortive Government of Ireland Act of 1914, providing home rule to Ireland; as well as agitation by suffragettes to extend the vote to women, who finally gained the franchise in 1918.

The recent changes, radical though they are, by no means complete the process of constitutional reform. The Blair government is currently holding discussions on reforms of party finance and on further reform of the House of Lords, perhaps including the introduction of an elected element. Moreover, Brown, the likely prime minister-to-be, gives an even higher priority than Blair has done to constitutional reform. Brown is eager to see an elected House of Lords, and has made speeches suggesting that Britain should follow nearly every other democracy in the world and produce a codified constitution.
Since Blair came to office, Britain has been engaged in a process quite unique in the democratic world, that of converting an uncodified constitution into a codified one, but by piecemeal means. There is today neither the political will to do more, nor any consensus on what the final resting-place should be. The British, a member of a public ethics panel recently declared, seem to “like to live in a series of halfway houses.” It is beginning to look as if they will need to accustom themselves to living in such halfway houses for rather a long time, at least until the foundations of the new constitution have been fully tested by experience.

Constitutional reform, in short, is an ongoing story in British politics. It is unlikely to come to an end with Blair’s resignation. What is already clear, however, is that the constitutional reforms of the Blair government are far-reaching in their implications and almost certainly permanent. They will be remembered long after most current political squabbles are forgotten.

Gladstone Redux

The public service and constitutional reforms undertaken by the Prime Minister represent historic achievements, but in recent years these have been overshadowed by the Iraq War, a war for which many will never forgive him. Before the invasion of Iraq, more than 40 percent of voters had a favorable opinion of Blair. That figure fell, immediately after the war began, to around 30 percent, and it has hardly risen since. Only 33 percent now think that the invasion was justified, while around two-thirds of those polled believe that Blair either exaggerated the threat from Iraq to justify the war or deliberately deceived the public.

In Iraq, however, survey evidence at the beginning of 2006 indicated that a large majority of Iraqis approved of the ouster of Saddam Hussein. Oddly enough, Blair may have more supporters in Baghdad than in Birmingham, where he is seen as anti-Muslim, even though he might argue that he has liberated more Muslims—in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Iraq—than any previous British prime minister.

In Britain, it is often suggested that Blair has been George W. Bush’s poodle, namely following the American president. Yet Blair’s conception of foreign policy was unveiled well before Bush came to the White House. Speaking in April 1999 in Chicago, Blair said, “We need to enter a new millennium where dictators know that they cannot get away with ethnic cleansing or repress their people with impunity.” His next sentence defined his foreign policy. “We are fighting,” he said of the war in Kosovo, “not for territory but for values.”

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Blair called for “a new doctrine of international community” that would qualify the principle of noninterference and explicitly recognize the facts of interdependence. Britain, together with other countries that sought to uphold international morality, had a right if not a duty to intervene where necessary to prevent genocide, to deal with “massive flows of refugees” that become “threats to international peace and security,” and to combat rogue states. Blair revived a liberal imperialism that owes more to William Gladstone than to traditional Labor doctrine, just as Bush’s foreign policy may owe more to Woodrow Wilson than it does to the neoconservatives.

In the past, British foreign policy had been based for the most part on a cool and pragmatic calculation of the national interest. The British had, it was suggested, permanent interests but no permanent allies. The main concern of British foreign policy had been to preserve the balance of power in Europe, whether against Louis XIV, Napoleon, the Kaiser, or Hitler. Moreover, British governments, whether Liberal, Conservative, or Liberal, had sought stability and a reduction in international tensions—appeasement in the best sense of that much-abused term.

In the early days of the Labor Party, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there had been much talk of an alternative approach, a “socialist foreign policy,” but it was never clear precisely what this meant. In its first election manifesto in 1906, Labor devoted just one half-sentence to foreign policy: “Wars are fought to make the rich richer. . . .” The sentence concluded: “. . . and school children are still neglected.” Keir Hardie, Labor’s first leader, felt that foreign policy issues were perfectly straightforward. Indeed, a Labor foreign policy was unnecessary, since the working class in all countries would rise up to prevent the ruling classes from making war. Thus, the coming to power of socialist governments would enable foreign ministries everywhere to shut up shop. Had not Karl Marx insisted that the working class had no country? This illusion died, of course, in 1914.

In 1937, Labor leader Clement Attlee, in his book The Labor Party in Perspective, had to confess that his party had “no real constructive foreign policy, but shared the views which were traditional in radical circles.” The foreign policy of the first two, minority, Labor governments had not in practice been very different from that of its Liberal predecessors. After World War II, under the foreign secretariatship of Ernest Bevin, from 1945 to 1951, Labor became committed to collective security, and the postwar Labor government played a major role in the setting up of NATO.

All the while, however, there had been an alternative principle of foreign policy on the left, the policy of humanitarian intervention. Gladstone had been its greatest practitioner. He had certainly not equated liberalism with appeasement or non-intervention. When he denounced the Bulgarian Horrors in 1876, he was not suggesting that Britain should disinterest herself in the Balkans. On the contrary, his complaint was that Britain was intervening on the wrong side, supporting the oppressor, Turkey, rather than the victim, Bulgaria. Indeed, wherever there was injustice, Gladstone sometimes seemed inclined to imply, Britain should make her voice felt even if this led to armed conflict. For “However deplorable wars may be,” he insisted in one of his Middlothian speeches in 1879, “they are among the necessities of our condition; and there are times when justice, when
faith, when the failure of mankind, require a man not to shrink from the responsibility of undertaking them.”

So it was that, in 1882, Gladstone inaugurated a humanitarian but “temporary” occupation of Egypt, an occupation that lasted more than 70 years. The one occasion on which President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt met then-Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, in 1954, was when British troops were at last being removed from Egypt. Nasser was invited to dinner at the British Embassy in Cairo, and said that he would be glad to enter the building from which Egypt had been governed for so long. “Not governed, perhaps,” Eden replied, “advised, rather.” Perhaps the Americans are saying something similar in Iraq.

It is this Gladstonian foreign policy that Blair has revived. He is perhaps the most Gladstonian prime minister to have occupied 10 Downing Street since the Grand Old Man himself. The Moral Imperative

The impact of Labor’s new foreign policy was first felt in the Balkans. Prime Minister John Major’s Conservative government had resisted involvement in the former Yugoslavia, arguing that what happened in the Balkans did not affect British interests. The policy was one of appeasement. Appeasement, however, works best in a community unified by broadly shared values and with some sense of mutual obligations and interests. It had as little to offer in the world of Slobodan Milosevic, Al Qaeda, and Saddam Hussein—the world of ethnic cleansing and the suicide bomber—as it had in the Europe of the 1930s, the Europe of Hitler and Mussolini. In the Balkans, as in Iraq, governments felt little sense of obligation toward their peoples, and there was not even a semblance of community or shared values.

In March 1999, the Blair government committed troops to Kosovo to counter what it regarded as a Serbian threat of genocide against the Albanian Muslim population. Intervention was, Blair believed, a moral duty. The same was true, he believed, in Afghanistan and Iraq. Of course, ministers also insisted that Afghan terrorism and Iraqi weapons of mass destruction constituted a genuine danger to Britain. Indeed, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States, the definition of British security widened. The war on terror meant that security involved more than mere territorial defense. It meant tackling terrorist networks and financing, and perhaps also removing regimes that promoted or allowed terrorist activity.

Still, this broader definition of security came to be intertwined with humanitarian arguments against the horrible regimes in Kabul and Baghdad. Part at least of the impetus for Blair’s foreign policy derives from its moral fervor, not from any careful calculation of British interests. The British went to war in Kosovo, and to some extent in Afghanistan and Iraq also, partly on humanitarian grounds. It would certainly be difficult to pretend that what happened in Kosovo affected British national interests.

And the Blair approach diverged from more than the traditional British focus on narrow national interest. In the past, British foreign policy had also on the whole ignored the internal nature of different regimes. Where it was in Britain’s interest to form an alliance with a regime whose internal politics were repugnant to her, as with the Soviet Union in 1941, she would unhesitatingly do so. The twentieth century, however, had seemed to show that the internal nature of a regime could not be divorced from its foreign policy, and that a country treated its own people might well prove a good indicator of how it would behave in international affairs.

Blair’s interventionist foreign policy offended the instincts of many if not most Labor members of Parliament, as it did the social democratic parties of Western Europe. These parties, while being committed to collective security, have been much more hesitant than Blair when it comes to the use of force. Labor was in fact the only social democratic party in Western Europe to support the Iraq War. It is by no means clear, therefore, whether the Blair reorientation of British foreign policy will survive into a new prime ministership.

A Good European?

Blair’s foreign policy aligned Britain with the United States rather than with France and Germany, hitherto the leading powers in the European Union. This is at first sight surprising. For whatever President Bush is, he is not a man of the left. He has defined himself as conservative, or perhaps a neoconservative. Classical American conservatism, however, derives from John Quincy Adams’s dictum of 1821, according to which America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Conservatives in the United States have generally adhered to a “realist” foreign policy, exemplified by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, an approach based on hardheaded calculations of the American national interest. It was, by contrast, Woodrow Wilson, a liberal, who had asked a very nonconservative question—How can the world be made safe for democracy?—a question that seemed to gain more relevance after 9-11. And Bush’s foreign policy has more in common with that of Wilson than with that of Kissinger. Bush is a Wilsonian, not a conservative, just as Blair is a Gladstonian. Gladstone, after all, would have had far more in common with Wilson than with Kissinger’s realism or the principle of raison d’état, another form of realism, which animates Gaullist France.

All the same, Blair’s foreign policy alignment with the United States seems paradoxical, since from the time he came to power he had sought to improve relations with the European Union and show himself to be a good European. In the Saint Malo Declaration of 1998, for example, Blair stressed the need for a European defense force. On receiving the Charlemagne prize in May 1999, he insisted that “full use” be made of “the potential Europe has to be a global force for good.” His government seemed the first to display a constructive attitude toward Europe since Edward Heath’s administration more than 30 years ago.

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ANNUAL EDITIONS

The paradox, however, is more apparent than real. Blair’s ethical foreign policy is incompatible with being a good European only if being a good European is defined in Gaullist terms. In the Iraq crisis, President Jacques Chirac simply proceeded to label the French position “European” and rebuked as non-communaute anyone who could not accept it. Yet Gaullism is not necessarily the same as Europeanism. Indeed, Gaullism may be regarded as but a high-sounding name for the pursuit of the French national interest, a pursuit that has dominated French foreign policy under governments of both left and right since the inauguration of the Fifth Republic in 1958. This is not the same as a European foreign policy.

Gaullism rests on a limited conception of Europe in which Germany remains subordinate while Britain keeps to the sidelines. Enlargement, however, is already causing a diplomatic revolution in Europe. The ex-communist states, as the Iraq crisis shows, are far more likely to accept the Anglo-American position in foreign policy than the Gaullist. (When these states announced that they supported Bush and Blair, President Chirac accused them of being mal eacute;levé—badly brought up.) Moreover, the ex-communist states are far more likely to accept the British conception of a loosely organized Europe than the more federalist conceptions of the Germans. Having struggled hard to win the right of national self-determination from Moscow, they are hardly eager to surrender their sovereignty to a supranational organization. The negative outcome of the French referendum on the EU constitution in May 2005 shows that President Chirac’s conception of Europe is not shared even by a majority of voters in France, let alone the continent as a whole.

From the time of Charles de Gaulle’s veto, in 1963, of Britain’s first application to enter the European Community, as it was then called, until the European Union’s enlargement during the 1990s, France was the dominant power in Europe, and a Franco-German motor drove the continent. France and Germany set the agenda; Britain was cast in the role of spoiler on the sidelines, the bad boy of Europe. Today, as Prime Minister Blair prepares to leave office, Britain is in a much stronger position in foreign affairs, able to influence both the United States and Europe, as both continents find themselves groping toward a new conception of collective security in a world facing new kinds of threats.

The “International Community”

Of course, the doctrine of humanitarian intervention raises as many questions as it answers, and both Bush and Blair have been struggling to grapple with them. Who is to decide when such intervention is justified? Is humanitarian intervention not in danger of leading to universal war for the sake of universal peace? Where is the “new doctrine of international community” of which Blair spoke at Chicago? One obvious, if flawed, answer to the question of who decides the conditions under which intervention is justified, is that it should be the United Nations. That, indeed, was the answer given by critics of the war in Iraq, as it had been by critics of the Suez War in 1956.

Woodrow Wilson’s conception of the League of Nations had been that of a Parliament of Man. The United Nations, however, is hardly that and perhaps can never be that, since not all of the member states represented there derive legitimacy from the consent of those whom they govern. Perhaps it can be realized only on a more limited basis by those countries whose governments do owe their legitimacy to the citizens whom they govern—that is, the democracies. Perhaps there is a need for the democracies to get together, to form a caucus, a new organization to help secure their interests in an increasingly dangerous international environment.

Blair at least pointed in this direction, as he searched for a middle way between Gaullism and unilateralism. The Gaullists had sought to unite Europe on the basis of an anti-American foreign policy. But such a policy, as the Iraq crisis showed, serves only to divide Europe. It could never unite it. Some in the Bush administration, by contrast, have sought a unilateral approach to problems of international terrorism and rogue states. This, too, has caused a rift in the Atlantic alliance, and it could never form the basis for a stable international order. The “new doctrine of international community” must, therefore, be genuinely multilateralist. Working out precisely what this new doctrine should be constitutes the most important challenge facing Blair’s successor as British foreign policy finds itself struggling to adapt the concept of collective security to the conditions of the post-9-11 era.

Is There Anything Left?

The central question raised by Blair’s long premiership—and it is highly relevant to the American left as well—is whether there is anything left of social democracy as an ideology. Blair’s public service reforms are, in practice, a continuation of those championed by Major, his Conservative predecessor. Blair’s constitutional reforms undermine the social democratic principle that benefits and burdens should depend on need and not on geography. For Scotland and Wales are now following principles of state welfare divergent from those of Westminster. In foreign policy, humanitarian interventionism has few roots in Labor’s past.

In 1894, a Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, declared, “We are all socialists now.” What he meant was that all believed in state intervention. The twentieth century was to be, for much of its duration, the century of state intervention. However, under Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative prime minister from 1979 to 1990, the state began to withdraw from society and the economy. Blair did nothing to reverse this process. Indeed, he could persuade British voters to support Labor only by, in effect, assuring them that “We are none of us socialists now.” It is a strange legacy for a prime minister of the left.

VERNON BOGDANOR is a professor of government at Oxford University. His latest book, The New British Constitution, will be published by Allen Lane/Penguin next year.