



JIM'S READING CORNER

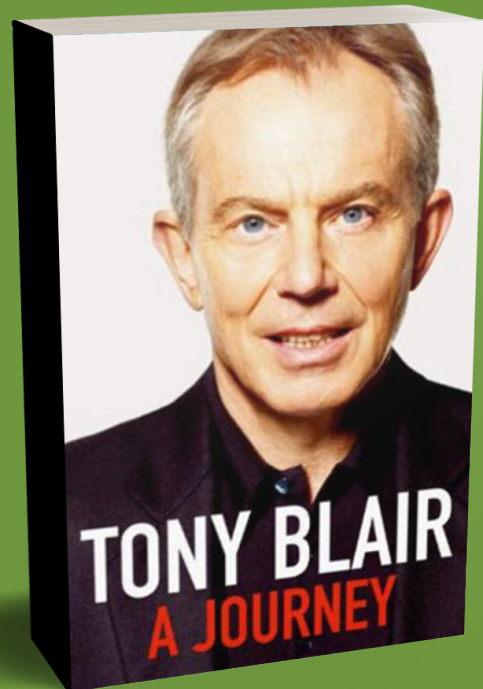
I had not meant to buy the book, reluctant as I was to contribute to the personal enrichment of Blair. I bought it when I found out that the proceeds went to charity. And Blair of course played a major role in European politics. Like many people I had high hopes in 1997 when he walked into 10 Downing Street. At a first meeting between him as the leader of the opposition and Commission President Santer in 1996 I had not been particularly impressed, to be honest; I found him superficial and completely ignorant of European affairs.

But here was a man with youthful energy, a positive discourse on Europe, an agenda of modernisation, who had thrown out of office a Conservative party that over the years had descended into rabid anti-Europeanism, social blindness, and narrow nationalism. What remains of the high hopes of the beginning, the promise of a new way of conducting politics? One should not measure Blair against the sole yardstick of the disastrous and ill-fated Iraq adventure. That would be unfair, even though the role Blair played personally here will leave a lasting stain on his record. There are however, other reasons to see his legacy as at best mixed and even somewhat tainted: the clear failure to confront the European question and to get Britain into the European mainstream, despite of his professed faith in European integration, a disturbing collusion with the likes of Rupert Murdoch, a habit of spinning, which ultimately tarnished his own reputation, and a failure to understand the downsides of exaggerated deregulation, where he had been the true heir to Thatcher.

I was interested to discover how Blair himself would present his legacy. The book reads well, the style is direct and terse, at times wry, and sounds personal. Blair obviously wrote it himself, which detracts from the literary quality but adds to the authenticity of the account. It is honest in exploring the challenges of leadership and modern politics and the ups and downs of a rich career. Blair oozes self-confidence but does recognize errors made; he is also quite funny when relating the mishaps that befell him or his party, or his eldest son Euan, found drunk at Leicester square one evening, at the precise time when Blair was launching major campaign against anti-social behaviour. The book is interesting on another account: Blair was much more personally involved in the intellectual debates of his day and the substance of politics than I thought. He clearly was not all spin and bling-bling, although the latter were certainly present all through his political life.

A JOURNEY: MY POLITICAL LIFE

BY TONY BLAIR





It is worth comparing Blair's own account of Northern Ireland and Iraq. The former is straightforward, powerful, convincing, and ultimately very impressive; it is the account of a gruelling battle for a good cause, and with a happy ending to boot. Blair and his team, among them Jonathan Powell and Peter Mandelson prominent here, deserve credit for a historic job well done. And the tribute Blair pays to his predecessor and hapless adversary John Major who had been the first to try and tackle the Northern Ireland problem in an intelligent manner deserves additional praise.

In contrast the narration of the Iraq adventure and scandal is muddled, piecemeal, and unconvincing; the sentences are routinely qualified by subordinate sentences, which is not all the usual Blair style, the tone is pleading and defensive. Blair recognizes errors made but stops short of saying that he was wrong in any fundamental sense of the word. In a way, I prefer that, because there is nothing I find more despicable than the now ritual "apologies" and grovelling recognitions of one's own behaviour that seems to be required of present-day politicians, egged on by journalists whose moral credentials are lower than those of the average politician. Be that as it may, Blair is not convincing about Iraq. He is frankly dishonest when he repeatedly conflates Saddam Hussein's quest for power and nuclear weapons with Al Qaeda's terrorist crusade. It is simply not true that they were fighting on the same sides, far from it. That only happened, to some degree, after the invasion of Iraq. Iraq was the messianic step too far.

Blair has a better story to tell about Kosovo and Afghanistan. It is true that the present revelations about Thaci and the UCK shine a fresh light on the Kosovo conflict and dent the ethical clarity of the war; but this cannot be held against Blair. Nor can the fact that the campaign in Afghanistan is more than struggling and that on balance the West would do well get out of the mess^[1]; the reasons for going in at the time were compelling.

The account of Blair's struggles with his own party is fascinating. He completed the work started by Neil Kinnock and John Smith to modernise Labour and transforming it into a government party. The "New Labour" rhetoric is a bit tiresome, but the fact is that "Old Labour" had become fossilised and hopelessly out of date. Having lived as a student in Britain in the late 1970s, through the years of the last Labour government before the Thatcher revolution, I can testify to the sorry state of the party and the country at the time. Blair showed determination, steel, and leadership throughout the fight against the old Labour guard.

He also tried to modernise the country, reforming the education system, the NHS, to name but these key areas, with what I believe to be reasonable success. He describes the daily grind this entails, the slow pace of reforms, the political and bureaucratic obstacles, the personal rivalries, which characterise modern politics.

The relationship with Brown looms large, of course, colouring the issues and debates. The story of the two old friends, allies in the fight for a new labour party, then rivals for the leadership and uneasy companions ever since is by now well-known and documented, not least by Peter Mandelson's "Third Man" account and Alastair Campbell's book. And yet I was astonished to discover the sheer extent of the rivalry, descending at times into hatred and aversion, the constant sniping, Blair's fears about Brown torpedoing "New Labour," the shabby compromise deal on Blair's promise to exit against Brown's support to his last policy initiatives. It reminded me of an encounter I had years back in Morocco with a young French 'énarque' who explained that in modern politics personalities did not matter, only structures and trends. A very naïve thought.

And then there is of course the gutter press, the nemesis of any modern day British Prime Minister. I still remember John Major saying to Jacques Santer one day: "The bastards, I hate them; I just can't run a decent policy on Europe with such a press." Blair could have said the same. Parts of the press in Britain has morphed into a monstrous and unaccountable machine that wrecks people's careers in the name of the "duty to inform" the public. This has taken proportions which, in my view, are no longer compatible with a functioning democracy. It is incredible to see the leader of the opposition in one of the major European countries flying to a remote Australian island to woo Rupert Murdoch in his bid for power. Who has ever elected Mr Murdoch? To whom is he accountable? Incidentally, I read with pleasure Blair's almost frantic denunciation of the Freedom of Information Act, which he considers having been one of his major political errors. It is a pity that he came to see the light only after having helped foist some of our crazy transparency rules on the EU. At Coreper at the time, under the Swedish presidency – the great crusaders for a system they themselves do not apply in the same way at home! – the only one to fight against their initiative was Pierre de Boissieu, the French Permanent Representative. It is good to see that the man who instructed the British representative in COREPER to counter Pierre's arguments now agrees with the latter, but it is too late. Talking about publicity and the press, I was impressed by Blair's recognition of stage fright and the terror he felt at Prime Minister's Question Time at Westminster. I found this reassuring.

[1] Note that this fiche was written in 2010