

Anthony Seldon, *Blair*
 Free Press: London 2005, £9.99, paperback
 800 pp, 0 743 23212 7

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THE THIRD CRUSADE

Elections in Britain on 5 May 2005 brought a third victory to Tony Blair's New Labour party, though with a much reduced majority in parliament, only 35 per cent of the popular vote, and barely a fifth of the overall electorate—the lowest percentage secured by any governing party in recent European history. 'When regimes are based on minority rule, they lose legitimacy', Blair had told an audience at the Chicago Economic Club in April 1999. He was thinking at the time of the former Yugoslavia of Slobodan Milošević and of apartheid South Africa, but his warning could now be applied to his own regime. More people abstained from voting in May 2005 than voted Labour. Disgust, rather than apathy, was the root cause of the abstention.

Widely celebrated as the first, 'historic' occasion on which a Labour government had won three elections in a row, the Blairite success might more relevantly be described as the sixth victory of a British government operating under Thatcherite principles since Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979. 'Almost everything Blair has done personally—in education, health, law and order and Northern Ireland—has also been an extension of Conservative policy between 1979 and 1997', argues Anthony Seldon in his exhaustive study, *Blair*, the largest and most useful of the raft of recently published biographies, most of which have been hagiographic but some more critical. Seldon's charge is difficult to refute, and Blair's relatively meagre showing in the election of 2005 had much to do with the disillusion of traditional Labour voters, finally obliged to admit that *their* party had been captured by the proponents of an alien ideology.

Blair's enthusiastic endorsement of the illegal American invasion of Iraq in 2003, in which he played a leading role as military ally and political

cheerleader, dismayed an even wider section of the British electorate and played an important part in whittling away his majority. Yet many Labour Party supporters were equally disappointed by his programme on the home front and his failure to construct a progressive alternative to the neoliberal policies established by Margaret Thatcher and John Major, his immediate Conservative predecessors. In continuing their drive to establish a neoliberal agenda and to roll back the frontiers of the state, Blair will be judged by history as an imitative and lacklustre politician with no wider achievement than that of building on their legacy.

None of New Labour's projects were original. The Northern Ireland policy that produced the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998 was the dream of John Major; he had put in the spadework. The process of decentralization, which led to the creation of political assemblies in Scotland and Wales, was the handiwork of John Smith, Blair's predecessor as Labour leader. The private finance initiative (PFI)—the introduction of private firms into the provision of education and health in the public sector—was one of several outlandish schemes first discussed in the Thatcher years. City academies, the retention of grammar schools and the device of top-up fees to help fund the universities were all Conservative proposals. Only the enthusiasm for war, the strategy of reforging the Anglo-American alliance and the resurrection of imperial ambition can be laid at Blair's door.

Blair's lack of original thinking is the principal complaint outlined in Anthony Seldon's book. Seldon is a distinguished and talented historian, writing in the conservative interest. The headmaster of one British private school, Brighton College, and soon to be head of another, Wellington College, he was the founder, with Peter Hennessy, of the Institute of Contemporary British History. He is the author of a small library of books, several of them about recent British prime ministers. His inordinately large biography, although tenuously chronological, is essentially thematic, with twenty chapters on the various dramas of the Blair era, and twenty on the individuals with whom he has been closely associated. These include members of his kitchen cabinet—Peter Mandelson, Alastair Campbell, Jonathan Powell and Anji Hunter—as well as figures from the world outside, like Clinton and Bush.

Seldon is a demon for work, and there is a wealth of material from private interviews as well as from cuttings. Yet it is essentially a British and American account, with little about Britain's allies in Europe—a notable and perhaps understandable omission. Although initially attracted to Blair, Seldon appears to have fallen out of love with the Blairite project (or lack of it), and his book reflects his own sense of disillusion. It seems that Blair proved less interesting, and less important in British history, than Seldon had imagined he would be.

Hopes that Blair might have led a genuinely radical government, to equal the achievements of the great reformist administrations of 1906 and 1945, were never high at the best of times, but after eight years he had produced little of substance for the history books. He had come to power in 1997 with a blank sheet that he proved unable to fill. At home, he had no personal project of significance, and the Labour Party of the 1990s was bereft of ideas of its own. After 18 years marked by fierce internal arguments and divisions, Labour was fearful of anything that smacked of a real alternative to the Conservative programme. The promise to maintain public spending at Tory levels during the first two years of government was indicative of a wider lack of nerve. In foreign affairs, Blair's dismal record of policies that flew directly in the face of Britain's wider interests ranks with those of Neville Chamberlain and Anthony Eden, although he sometimes seems to fancy himself in the mantle of William Gladstone, the great nineteenth-century liberal imperialist. As the Iraq Occupation has degenerated into ever-deeper violence and chaos, 'Iraq' joins 'Munich' and 'Suez' in the lexicon of British foreign policy disasters.

Blair's pre-election statement that he would retire in the course of the current parliament, probably in 2007, has led many writers to prepare his political obituary, attempting to explain how a politician so widely welcomed as a new broom in 1997 had become so unpopular, and such a liability to his party, by 2005. Blair's many biographers have pored over his life's choices to reveal the figure of a grey and essentially conventional lawyer, with little aptitude for management, poor inter-personal skills and deep ignorance of the outside world, who frequently evokes religious faith as a substitute for rational thought. This is one of his two most unusual characteristics. Blair is not an ordinarily religious man; he is by many accounts a 'religious nut', a 'New Ager', a man who obeys his own inner voices and takes scant notice of religious authority. He had to be rebuked by the principal Catholic archbishop for taking Catholic communion when nominally a Protestant, and cautioned by the chief Protestant archbishop against moving too close to Rome. He consistently ignored the warnings against the invasion of Iraq made by the Pope and the Anglican archbishop, both of whom were outspokenly hostile to the eventual war.

As an overtly religious prime minister, Blair has been at odds with the larger part of his country which, like most of Europe, has become increasingly secular in recent years. His religious fervour—he was, unusually, confirmed in the Anglican communion as an adult, when a student at Oxford—is a relatively unfamiliar phenomenon in contemporary Britain. Indeed Blair, who has apparently read through the Koran three times, sometimes seems more at home with the Muslim revival experienced by part of the British electorate than with the secular style of the Church of England. Blair does

not like to be bracketed with right-wing religious fundamentalists in the United States, but like many of them he is a genuine ‘friend of Israel’, a country that he visited twice before becoming prime minister. His knowledge of and support for Israel has long been guided by Lord Levy, a millionaire in the music business who became Blair’s tennis partner, the Labour Party’s chief fundraiser and, for a while, the prime minister’s eyes and ears in the Middle East.

Blair’s second unusual characteristic is his ability as an actor. Both at Fettes, the Scottish private school he attended in the 1960s, and at St John’s College, Oxford, where he was a mediocre law student, he was an accomplished thespian, appearing in the classics, in comedy revues, and fronting a band. His capacity to act and to put on an act, to perform his lines, and to diverge from a script when circumstances demand, has become the hallmark of his career as a politician, unequalled since Harold Macmillan, Britain’s last great showman prime minister.

What remains a mystery even today, and is not adequately explained in any of the Blair biographies, is how the Labour Party allowed a maverick right-winger to become their leader, a man who became a close intimate and political ally not only of a neo-conservative Republican like George W. Bush, but also of José María Aznar of Spain and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy—European right-wingers of a definably unpleasant slant. Blair is no Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour traitor of the 1930s who was seduced by the rich and famous. He is, and clearly always has been, a deep-dyed Tory, far further to the right than recent Conservative leaders like John Major or William Hague, who, as One Nation Tories, appear benign by comparison. So why did the Labour Party fall for Blair? Partly, of course, because of his surface charm and verbal felicity. In an indifferent field he made his way swiftly to the front, before anyone had had the time to penetrate beneath the veneer of competence and ideological neutrality. With the defenestration of the useless Neil Kinnock, the death of the dreary John Smith, and the lack of killer instinct in the gloomy Gordon Brown, the bland figure of Blair, youthful and glib, was seen as the only class act available.

His swift rise to the top was an indictment of the Labour Party’s recruiting capacity over the previous thirty years. Tony Blair might have been no great shakes, as some people recognized at the time, but he was all there was. The intelligent and the ambitious in Britain had abandoned the attempt to work their way up through the major political parties as long ago as the 1960s. Many of them had chosen instead the loucher, and more immediately remunerative, worlds of commerce, culture and the media. An honourable career in government service, as an elected politician or ill-paid bureaucrat, had little appeal for the British elite in the late 20th century. The electorate has taken note of this defection.

The Labour Party that chose Tony Blair as its leader in 1994, and the New Labour Party that first presented itself to the voters in 1997, was already a pale shadow of the historic Labour Party of Clement Attlee and Harold Wilson. The progressive institution in which middle-class intellectuals once rubbed shoulders with the working class, in government and in local party organizations, was a thing of the past. The members of Blair's cabinet could hardly scrape up a first class degree between them, while the decimated ranks of labour itself were scarcely represented. New Labour was a bourgeois party that had shed its working-class trappings and lost its intellectual edge. Its task now was to represent the aspirational middle class constructed during the Thatcher years, picking up the relay of Thatcherism while giving neoliberal policies a more human face. Some Labour Party supporters might have perceived Blair as a cuckoo in the nest, but most people saw that he could talk the talk and walk the walk—and do so better than most.

Like other prime ministers before him, Blair soon found it relatively easy to posture on the world stage. A structural problem has long existed in the British system of government, which means that ministers in charge of home affairs are encouraged to get on with their individual tasks, leaving the prime minister with few opportunities to influence the domestic agenda. Many prime ministers, who are also titled First Lord of the Treasury, seek to intervene in economic affairs, usurping the role of the Chancellor of the Exchequer; but this was not possible in Blair's case. Gordon Brown, his more knowledgeable and experienced rival, blocked his way.

Blair's only chance to star was to take charge of foreign affairs, run first by Robin Cook and later by Jack Straw. Cook was much put upon by Blair's coterie of foreign advisers, but he had no friends in cabinet to complain to. He was dropped as foreign secretary in 2001 because, according to several accounts, he had failed to get on with the US vice-president, the neo-conservative Dick Cheney. He eventually resigned from government over the Iraq war in 2003—Blair and his American friends were happy to see him go. Jack Straw, Cook's replacement, was more ignorant of foreign affairs and more pliable. He stayed put at the Foreign Office without much complaint, while Blair made foreign policy on the hoof, reviving Britain's imperial war machine and providing old-fashioned rhetoric to match. In his man-of-action mode, Blair even accused John Major of 'presiding over the largest reduction in our military capability since the war.'

Few people imagined in 1997 that Blair's brand of conservatism would drag Britain back to the days of empire, with fresh wars of conquest and new forms of colonial rule, in alliance with the sole surviving superpower. No one would have guessed then that a British viceroy would be sent to run Bosnia, that British generals would control parts of Sierra Leone and Iraq, or that British civil servants would be appointed to help with the adminis-

tration of Kosovo and Afghanistan. So where did this new enthusiasm for empire come from? Not even Seldon's biography provides an answer to this conundrum, nor is the question asked. Thatcher had never shown any interest in taking up the white man's burden, and the Conservative concern for empire at the end of the 20th century was largely confined to expressions of nostalgic empathy with the white settlers of southern Africa. Only sections of academia and of publishing were tuned into the same wavelength as Blair, with right-wing historians like Niall Ferguson and Andrew Roberts judging that the time was right to emphasize the benevolent aspects of empire.

Blair's biographers often remark on the new prime minister's unfamiliarity with international affairs, and the fact that he had rarely expressed himself on any foreign topic when in opposition, yet fail to explain his metamorphosis into world statesman and philosopher of foreign affairs. He had received informal briefings from recently-retired Foreign Office mandarins when finally in sight of office, but these had dealt more with the detail of Britain's particular problems in Brussels or at the United Nations than with some grand reformulation of Britain's role in the world. Robin Cook's improbable invention of an 'ethical' foreign policy, outlined in the first week of power in May 1997 and swiftly forgotten, was seen as his own sideshow, conducted from the Foreign Office.

Yet signs of the imperial megalomania of Blair and his coterie of advisers were discernible, for those with eyes to see, as early as the morning of his election. After accepting the Queen's official invitation to take up the reins of government, he was driven from Buckingham Palace to 10 Downing Street, and there, in a new and invented ceremony, he was greeted by hundreds of supporters waving the Union Jack. New Labour and its prime minister, was the message, would clothe themselves in the red, white and blue of the national flag, the most historically evocative symbol of Britain's imperial past.

No more powerful image of the government's intention could have been constructed. The British in normal circumstances do not 'do' public patriotism. Not for them the *tricolore* on every village green and from every urban balcony. Schoolchildren may be dragooned into turning out for visits by the Queen or foreign dignitaries, and infrequent royal anniversaries may produce a display of coloured bunting, but politicians rarely swathe themselves in the national colours. With their inherited complex of innate superiority, the British have never felt the need to congratulate themselves publicly on their good fortune to be a top nation. The Conservatives may sometimes display the Union flag in their local committee rooms, yet this is more to be viewed as an element of the furnishings than as a significant political statement. Labour, on the other hand, though often drawing on deep reserves of patriotism, notably within what were once the cohorts of the organized working class, has never been demonstrative in its use of

national icons. May 1997 marked a sea change in the party's public presentation of itself and its leader.

At the end of a century that had seen the British Empire expand to its furthest limits—to the northern frontiers of Iraq at the end of the first world war—and then rapidly deflate under the Conservatives in the 1960s, Labour—traditionally the least imperialistic of all Britain's political parties—made clear its plan to resume an imperial project in the new conditions of the post-Cold War age. As the illegal wars of Blair's premiership succeeded one another in subsequent years, no one could complain that they had not been warned. In his excellent book entitled *Blair's Wars*—there have been five in six years—John Kampfner points out that Blair had made one particular speech during the 1997 election campaign, at the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester, that had emphasized his nationalistic leanings: 'I am a British patriot and I am proud to be a British patriot. I love my country. I will always put the interests of my country first. The Britain in my vision . . . is a Britain confident of its place in the world, sure of itself, able to negotiate with the world and provide leadership in the world.' This remarkably non-Labour speech, drafted by his foreign affairs adviser Jonathan Powell, even included the sentence 'I am proud of the British Empire', though this was removed at the last moment.

Blair's belief that Britain had a significant role again in the world, and his messianic sense of his own importance in activating that role, was first laid out to a foreign audience two years later, in the speech to the Chicago Economic Club in April 1999. This was a key text, and one that his advisers felt had been unduly overlooked—partly because it took place in the middle of the night as far as the British public was concerned—so it was virtually repeated at the Labour Party conference in Brighton in October 2001, in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center. His advisers thought that 'an updated statement would help prepare the ground for what was about to unfold shortly in Afghanistan and possibly beyond.'

In Chicago, Blair had announced 'the beginnings of a new doctrine of international community'. He was speaking in the middle of the NATO aggression against Serbia during the Kosovo campaign. This phrase was a typically Blairite one of great portentousness and even greater vacuity, but it was designed to signal the start of a new imperial era in which he hoped that the United States and Europe would jointly participate. The speech was not Blair's own; it had been drafted by Lawrence Freedman, a foreign affairs groupie who had been on the fringes of officialdom for many years, and professor of war studies at King's College, London. The phrase 'international community', however, was all Blair. He had dreamt it up on the plane.

Blair also launched into his own untutored explorations of history. He told his audience of fearful events taking place across the Atlantic: 'Unspeakable

things are happening in Europe. Awful crimes that we never thought we would see again have reappeared—ethnic cleansing, systematic rape, mass murder.’ He was talking about Milošević’s government in Serbia, but he failed to explain that much of the horror in the Balkans at that particular moment—the destruction of cities and bridges, and the flight of hundreds of thousands of refugees—had been occasioned less by Milošević’s army and more by the NATO bombing campaign that Blair himself had helped to instigate. Blair turned to the old arguments about appeasement that have had an easy reception in the United States over the years, ever since the publication in 1940 of John F. Kennedy’s youthful book, *When England Slept*. Continuing his historical exposition, Blair explained what he thought were its lessons: ‘We have learnt twice before in this century that appeasement does not work. If we let an evil dictator range unchallenged, we will have to spill infinitely more blood and treasure to stop him later.’

Apparently unexceptional, these Blairite sentences deserve some exegesis. ‘Twice before’? So was the Kaiser the beneficiary of appeasement in 1914, as well as Hitler in 1939? And what is this reference to ‘blood and treasure’? What strange kind of Churchillian rhetoric was Blair the actor summoning up to condemn a minor warlord on Europe’s eastern marches? Blair went on to call for ‘a new Marshall Plan’ for the Balkans, evoking the memory of the conditional us loans to Europe at the start of the Cold War, and well aware that Britain could not afford to run a new empire on its own. The British operations in the Balkans were not cheap, as Jack Straw revealed to the audience at the Foreign Policy Centre in March 2002: ‘Sorting out Bosnia cost the British taxpayer at least £1.5 billion, Kosovo cost £200 million.’ Britain needed ‘blood and treasure’—troops and money—from the Americans if the Kosovo war was to be won, and if the wider imperial revival was to be pursued. This was something that President Clinton was little inclined to provide. Only in the era of George W. Bush, and after 9/11, did the Americans begin listening to Blair’s imperial message.

In the Chicago speech, Blair outlined a five-point, non-negotiable ultimatum to Serbia, which had shades of the ultimatum issued to the same country by Franz Joseph nearly ninety years earlier: a cessation of hostilities; withdrawal from the contested region; the deployment of an international military force; the return of refugees and unimpeded access for humanitarian aid; and the establishment of a political framework imposed from outside. This was to become the pattern for future imperial interventions, soon followed in Sierra Leone, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq. He also outlined five considerations that should govern the workings of this new interventionist imperialism. Imperial aggressors in future would need to be sure of their case; exhaust the diplomatic options; ensure that military

operations were sensible and prudent; plan for the long term; and prove that their national interests were at stake.

As the years went by, and 9/11 provided an excuse to elaborate on this interventionist programme and to proselytise in favour of it, Blair grew ever more confident, and more outrageous in his evocation of history. In his constituency of Sedgefield in March 2004, he spoke about the evolution of his thinking: 'Before September 11, I was already reaching for a different philosophy in international relations from a traditional one that has held sway since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.' That treaty, Blair found it necessary to inform the good burghers of Sedgefield, had established the doctrine of non-intervention in the affairs of other states, a basic strategy that had informed British foreign policy for more than 350 years. Now it was time to junk it all and to re-order the world. 9/11 was a wake-up call, and Blair was the only man available to respond to its message.

Blair is wrongly characterized as the lapdog of George W. Bush. He has developed into a politician with a programme of his own, and he seeks to use the power of the United States to support it. During the second world war, in what was still the era of Franklin Roosevelt, us rhetoric was hostile to the empires of Europe, and the withholding of American money in the post-war period was instrumental in accelerating their collapse. Blair's aim is to reverse that policy, and persuade the Americans to use their 'blood and treasure' to restore the old empires in a form suitable for the age of globalization. His Commission for Africa, and the neo-imperialist New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), are designed to re-introduce strategies of colonial control with American support.

It is of course a pipe-dream. The clock cannot be turned back in such a way. Old empires cannot be recovered or reconstructed. The citizens of 'Old' Europe have no great taste for war, while the United States—when true to its historical record—remains isolationist at heart. Blair may seek to find fame as a professor of international relations, and maybe a retirement home could be found for him at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, but in office he has been found seriously wanting. Few British prime ministers have been so inadequately prepared for government, and few have been so arrogantly unaware of their failings.

It is a British tragedy that the same must be said of his ministerial colleagues, skilled in nothing over nearly two decades but the shabby politics of opposition and the sectarian infighting that accompanied it. Their inability to prevent the Gadarene descent into war with Iraq in 2003, with Blair as the most demoniacally possessed of the pigs that urged their colleagues over the precipice, has led to one of the greatest failures of government in recent history. Not only the prime minister but his cabinet, his junior ministers, members of parliament, the government bureaucracy, the security

services and the so-called 'Rolls-Royce' foreign service have all been involved. Britain's entire governing elite has been found wanting. Many of them hastened to wash their hands of responsibility afterwards, but they were mostly complicit at the time. The handful of honourable resignations was very far from tipping the balance against the government's policy. The legacy of this abysmal failure will be long-lasting, and only the passing of years and the emergence of a new generation can bring recovery from the national humiliation caused by Blair's war of 2003.

If and when that recovery happens, the reconstruction will take place in fresh circumstances and over the ashes of the old political parties; institutions of the political system that have failed to represent the population. Just what caused the collapse of the *ancien régime* will preoccupy later historians, but even contemporary observers can detect the outline of the rotting timbers at the heart of these historical parties. Thatcher made the Conservative Party permanently unfit for power, Blair has destroyed the Labour Party. Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats have all continued to pay lip service to their ancient tribal beliefs, but voters remember neither the words nor the music of their songs. That is the legacy of a disastrous quarter-century of political life, dominated by the neoliberal agenda of Thatcher and the neo-imperial wars of Tony Blair.