

## One nation under Blair: an interview with David Marquand

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*The British prime minister is an extraordinary work of art who combines windy rhetoric, disinterest in ideas, desire to be liked, carelessness with the facts, and messianic zeal. But does he also offer the people what they want? The veteran analyst of Britain's centre-left, David Marquand, discusses Tony Blair's latest Labour Party conference speech with openDemocracy editor Anthony Barnett.*

**Anthony Barnett:** What were your first reactions on listening to the British prime minister Tony Blair's speech on 28 September at the Labour Party conference in Brighton?

**David Marquand:** It is essentially one-nation conservatism. Everybody should work hard and have opportunities to better themselves while the state provides, in effect, a safety-net. At one point he said – I'm quoting from his speech – "It is New Labour that now wears the one-nation mantle". Labour didn't make that mantle. He's taken it from the Conservative tradition of Harold Macmillan.

I also think it's pretty well where the British people stand. The differences between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, which have been talked about so much, are not that great. Brown is pitching the same message to traditional Labour voters and Blair is pitching it to people who are not traditionally Labour but are essential to the extraordinary coalition that he has created. It forms a fairly consistent whole, I think. Currently it is the least bad programme on offer.

**Anthony Barnett:** Jef McAllister, who is the Time magazine bureau chief in London and has sat in nearly every press conference that Blair has given, talks of his mesmerising capacity to escape, Houdini-like, from every trap he appears to be in. He once commented – it was just an aside, but seemed to me a telling one – that "Tony Blair is a work of art".

**David Marquand:** I know what he is getting at! I think it's true that there is artfulness but in a large part it is instinctive. He believes, usually correctly, that he is the personification of the spirit of the age. He feels a personal vision which, broadly speaking, is acceptable to the great majority of the British people. I think it's authoritarian and in many ways illiberal.

Blair is a quintessential public school prefect who doesn't like troublemakers. But in all this, he represents the common sense of the age. So on issues like gay rights, which he explicitly mentioned in his speech, he is progressive. That's why he is offended when his righteousness is questioned or disturbed by, for example, the arrival of too many asylum-seekers.

### The curse of the Iraq war

**Anthony Barnett:** Are the people and “the spirit of the age” with him on Iraq?

**David Marquand:** The speech had two parts. The first was domestic, the one-nation aspect and its programme. The second part was on why he has supported Bush and the Iraq war. This in fact, was not about Iraq but was explicitly about trust, and why people have ceased to trust him. There was a very peculiar, furtive pretend-apology which was really an evasion. The conference seemed to accept it judging by the way that the television picked up the response. It's hard to know what people really thought and what they would have said to themselves afterwards.

**Anthony Barnett:** He said he was sorry that the information he was given on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was wrong but that he wasn't sorry for getting rid of Saddam as a result. But it is surely the determining test of leadership to be able to assess the information you are given.

**David Marquand:** It goes further than that. What he said was that he couldn't apologise, at least not sincerely, an interesting way of putting it, for getting rid of Saddam. But in fact he didn't go to war to get rid of Saddam. At least that was not the stated reason at the time. The stated reason at the time was that Saddam was a dangerous and imminent threat to the region and indeed perhaps to the peace of the world because of his possession of WMD.

He did not mention the United Nations in his speech at all. But the only conceivable basis for suggesting that the war was legal under international law was UN resolutions which referred to WMD and not to the nature of the Saddam regime. To say he won't apologise for getting rid of Saddam is actually to say that he is not apologising for going to war in defiance of international law.

**Anthony Barnett:** How has he managed to get away with it?

**David Marquand:** I don't think he has got away with it. I think the reason why there is this distrust in Tony Blair by the British electorate is that they know bloody well that they have been deceived. And probably this includes most members of the Labour party.

**Anthony Barnett:** Deception indeed. When Blair signed the preface to the dossier that the British government

published in September 2002, he endorsed information that Saddam Hussein had WMD that could be used within forty-five minutes. The information which led to the inclusion of this was that these were battlefield weapons, to be deployed if attacked.

In March 2003, Blair made his speech to the House of Commons that persuaded it to vote for war and he emphasised the threat. Later Blair told parliament that he was unaware that the forty-five-minute threat referred to battlefield not strategic weapons – even though his defence minister, who doesn't seem to be the brightest member of the Cabinet, and his chief of staff who seems to have asked that this information be taken out of the dossier, did know.

For six months, then, the prime minister of the United Kingdom believed that there could be a strategic threat to the country's interests that reinforced the need for war when his close colleagues were aware there was not. Is this a state of affairs one can brush aside

by saying “sorry the information was wrong”?

**David Marquand:** Well it's preposterous isn't it? One possibility is that he was extremely delinquent because the prime minister ought to find out. And by the way Robin Cook, the ex-foreign secretary and at the time still a member of the Cabinet as Leader of the House, asked for an interview with the intelligence services and came away convinced that there was no such threat. It is extraordinary.

Whatever way you look at it, either Blair is asking us to believe something, putting it mildly, which is very discreditable to him, namely that the prime minister, the person responsible for taking us to war, didn't actually know the nature of the threat that he was taking us to war over...

**Anthony Barnett:** And didn't even ask about it.

**David Marquand:** And didn't even ask about it. Or, that he did ask about it and he was told and is now suppressing that fact. I have no proof, but I think that he probably was aware that the information was utterly flimsy and wanted to give himself deniability. He did not want to inspect the evidence too closely because there already was momentum for war from which he did not want to disengage.

Overall, however, perhaps his biggest error or failure was that he deceived himself not over WMD, but into thinking that he would get the UN second resolution.

*“How has he managed to get away with it?”*

He convinced himself that, so great were his powers of persuasion, he would be able to reconcile the differences between Jacques Chirac and George W Bush and get the second UN resolution which would have made all the stuff about WMD, forty-five minutes, and so on irrelevant.

**Anthony Barnett:** But afterwards at the UN they said that the reason such diplomacy didn't work was that everyone was perfectly aware that the Americans had already taken the decision to go to war. The Americans did not hide this and therefore they were being asked to take part in a charade. No amount of British polish and hee-hawing could hide the blatant reality. So doesn't such a major mis-judgement also point to the fact that Blair decided to go to war with the Americans whatever happened and therefore he lied to the country about the reasons for the war?

**David Marquand:** It may be Jesuitical, but technically I don't think he lied. He didn't tell the truth. Some might say that this makes him even more untrustworthy.

The more I think about his speech the more I find frightening for another reason, the justification offered by Blair for the so-called "war on terror".

This part of his speech was totally sincere. Here you had a man telling the truth as he sees it, passionately so, and it is a terrifying truth because what he is saying is that there is an evil conspiracy designed to destroy the western way of life fomented by a perversion of Islam, as he put it. This is the politics of paranoia. What is especially alarming is the way he brought in Chechnya because the origins of Chechen terrorism were completely different. It was the Russian treatment of the Chechens that drove the conflict, and to validate Putin's lurch back towards Russian despotism is very, very worrying. That Britain's leader should support Putin in this way is extremely dangerous and even wicked. It helps to foster belief that there is a single-minded group of evil fanatics pitting themselves for totally irrational reasons against the western world.

If that is what you think then I'm afraid it's not enough to get rid of Saddam Hussein. I mean we will be sending troops to Chechnya as well, and perhaps into Iran. I find it in a way incomprehensible that a group of basically sane British pragmatists who are not deeply intellectual or ideologically sophisticated and who want to create a more fair and more kindly society in this country should be willing to follow this kind of messianic zeal.

### The scourge of the British constitution

**Anthony Barnett:** Britain is supposed to be a country where, if its leader deceives the nation over the reasons for war, even if, to be very generous, he deceives himself in the process, and then utterly misjudges his strategy in the world's foremost chamber of diplomacy, and then, as you put it, inflates the real threat of terrorism into a global war, well, it is supposed to be a country whose institutions have enough checks and balances to ensure that the leader is told, enough is enough.

**David Marquand:** Because we don't have a proper constitution in Britain in the end the only body that can remove a prime minister in this way is the majority party in the House of Commons.

**Anthony Barnett:** But isn't there a broader failure of the institutions – or rather aren't we looking at an assault upon them that means the prime minister can remain unchecked? Let me try and list them.

First, there is the parliamentary Labour party – the MPs whose power you say is decisive. Patronage has cut off much of what willpower they had.

Second, the House of Commons itself has been hollowed out, its self-belief has collapsed, aided by the decomposition of the Conservative party now Blair has stolen the better part of its wardrobe. All this is reinforced by the way the Blair government has turned the House of Lords into a crony-style second chamber depleting it of legitimacy. At the same time the Labour Party has become a shell of its former size, lacking conviction and losing membership and this feeds back into the spirit of MP's.

Third, the independence of the civil service is under attack and is being exposed to corporate interests as Blair seeks to make it possible for senior civil servants to be recruited directly into corporations – an issue which only Private Eye has covered in any detail. We have seen a similarly motivated attack on the BBC. Now Blair has appointed John Scarlett to be the head of the intelligence services, a man who officially is described as being "unconsciously influenced" by the desires of the leader. We have even got to the position where leading members of the judiciary are calling for a written constitution because they see the independence of the law itself being undermined.

New Labour inherited the royalist, prerogative powers of the constitution. It had a contempt for the old regime, which in my view was justified. But Blair also has an equal if not greater contempt for democracy.

This makes his willingness to use those now unchecked central powers all the more dangerous, as the old regime is spread-eagled before him and the authoritarianism that you talked about kicks in. The Iraq war decision has shown that the inherited, informal constitution and all its institutions are depleted of their capacity to check and resist abuses of power.

**David Marquand:** Well I agree with that. I think the central political philosophy behind this, as I argue in my recent book, is populism. Blair is a quintessential populist. Not in the sense that he does what the people always want but in the sense that he believes deep down that he in some mysterious, mystical way is the incarnation of the popular will. If the people happen to disagree with him at any given moment, well that is because they have obviously been misled but he can certainly persuade them. The institutions that you speak about are also institutions which can act as impediments to uncluttered communication between “the leader and the people”. As you rightly say he has systematically emasculated them.

But it must be emphasised that this style of government did not start with Blair. Margaret Thatcher was the first populist innovator in recent British history. Blair’s economic policies differ from her neo-liberalism; he is much more consensual. But his populist political style follows where she led.

**Anthony Barnett:** Internationally, all the leaders of the coalition – Bush, Blair, Putin and Berlusconi – are populists in the way that you are describing.

**David Marquand:** Yes indeed they are. It has to be said that with all its huge and manifold weaknesses the

American system does have more checks than Britain’s. One can see that in the way that Congress has been acting in investigating the war, which has been more effective than any of the enquiries that have happened here.

On the fundamental point, yes you are right. If you look around the world it may well be that the pattern now in most so called liberal democracies is that they are not liberal democracies any more. They are populist democracies.

**Anthony Barnett:** If so, what is the route from populism to democracy?

**David Marquand:** I don’t think that there is an easy route. In an age like this, with a media of the kind we see, it is so extraordinarily easy to discredit opponents who advocate democratic discussion with the dread word “elitist”. “You are in favour of the judges as opposed to the people”, says David Blunkett almost every day – that is pure populism.

The treatment of the BBC over the Hutton inquiry was a prime example of it. It is something we in Britain can pride ourselves in, that we have a state-funded broadcaster that is independent of the government. But Blair tried to muzzle it. It’s all part of a pattern. But the point that needs to be made, as we are talking about his speech, is that if it was just a personal invention of Blair’s it wouldn’t matter so much. But it is part of the pattern which has become the predominant form of politics in the United Kingdom and perhaps elsewhere since Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came to power in 1979-80.

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*David Marquand* is former principal of Mansfield College, Oxford. Among his many books are *The Unprincipled Society* (1988), *Ramsay MacDonald* (2nd edition, 1997), *The New Reckoning: capitalism, states, and citizens* (1997), and *The Progressive Dilemma* (2nd edition, 1999). His latest book is *Decline of the Public: the hollowing-out of citizenship* (Polity Press, 2004).

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