Mr Blair's Messiah Politics: A story of inspired government, 1997-2007

This pamphlet is an updated and revised second edition of three chapters of my 2006 book Mr Blair's Messiah Politics: Or what happened when Bambi tried to save the world (SAU)...

Mr Blair's Messiah Politics:
A story of inspired government, 1997-2007
by Richard D North

A 10th anniversary update of three chapters of
Mr Blair's Messiah Politics:
Or what happened when Bambi tried to save the world
(SAU, 2006)

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Modern Planet: A manifesto for progress, Manchester University Press, 1995. He has contributed to the "happiness" debate with Rich Is Beautiful: A very personal defence of Mass Affluence, SAU, 2005.

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Blair quotes

"Mine is the first generation able to contemplate the possibility that we may live our entire lives without going to war or sending our children to war." Tony Blair, in his first month as Prime Minister.
Paris, 27 May, 1997 [www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page1022.asp]

"Right, let's star' in." Tony Blair, in his last months as Prime Minister
(Inviting his state guests to begin eating in the formal dining room, 10 Downing St.)
MasterChef Goes Large, BBC2, 14 March, 2007.

"On Africa, I fear my own conscience and I fear the judgement of future generations." Tony Blair, at the launch of his Commission for Africa, 11 March, 2005.

"The kaleidoscope has been shaken, the pieces are in flux, soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us reorder this world around us." Tony Blair's Labour party conference speech, after 9/11, 2001.

"It's worse than you think. I believe in it. I am truly committed to dealing with this, irrespective of the position of America." Tony Blair, interview with The Guardian, just before the Iraq war, 1 March, 2003. [link]

RDN quote

"Blair developed a Messiah Politics whose main characteristic was manipulative loftiness&. Oddly, as we shall see, it contributed to Blair's only claim to greatness."
RDN, Introduction
Mr Blair's Messiah Politics: A story of inspired government, 1997-2007

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Introduction

A note on organisation

This pamphlet is an updated and revised second edition of three chapters of my 2006 book Mr Blair's Messiah Politics: Or what happened when Bambi tried to save the world (SAU). It replaces the 2006 Introduction, the 2006 chapterMessiah Politics in practice, and the 2006 Conclusion.

I have given the pamphlet a new subtitle: "A story of inspired government, 1997-2007. Irony (or is it sarcasm?) is a tricky ploy in titles. Still, I want to convey that this book is essentially about Tony Blair's politics - the way he got and used power. These pages focus much less on the merits of Blair's policies than on their inspiration and the "coup" by which he delivered them (or not).

The new Introduction takes account of events since 2005 but often refers to chapters in the previous 2006 book and is a guide to them. The new Conclusion discusses Blair's legacy rather than his reputation. That's to say, it discusses whether Blair's Messiah Politics will be inherited by, say Gordon Brown and David Cameron.

I rewrote the 2006 chapter Messiah Politics in practice because it covered Blair's work on Africa, climate change, and his anti-terror wars and these have all moved on dramatically since 2005.

Introduction

My reading of Tony Blair is an uncommon one. I see the trajectory of his career as having been upward. I am inclined to think that being Prime Minister was character-forming for Mr Blair. I loathed everything he stood for when he came into office in 1997, but ten years later I find a good deal to admire.

There is much to dislike about Mr Blair's Messiah Politics, but they also helped him become admirable.

Mr Blair's Messiah Politics defined

There is Blairism, and it is Mr Blair's Messiah Politics. Tony Blair was a uniquely inspired leader: his sources of inspiration mattered to him, and he was capable of inspiring others. As I discussed in the 2006 chapters The evolution of Messiah Politics and The Blair narrative, his biographers testify that he discovered religion at Oxford, and that it took a political - an activist - form. A brilliant telegenic operator, Blair developed a politics whose main characteristic was manipulative loftiness. He was not quite a Baby Boomer or one of Thatcher's Children, but he had elements of both. He wanted to change the world for the better, and be seen as the person who made the transformation. These desires made him grab much more power than any previous Prime Minister has wielded. As the former Head of the Civil Service and Cabinet Secretary, Lord (Richard) Wilson told BBC Radio 4's Shape Up, Sir Humphrey, in March 2007: "New Labour ... staged a coup first of all against the Labour Party and then against the processes of government." [Link] That is a remarkable testimony to the power of Messiah Politics. Oddly, as we shall see, it contributed to Blair's only claim to greatness.

The path from 1997 to 2007

Back in 1997, I thought Tony Blair's endless spin-doctoring - the gap between perception and reality - would sink his premiership. It didn't, altogether. It seems much more that he simply ran out of steam, or popular esteem. Sleaze, mis-spent taxes, and the contempt which familiarity has wrought, have all taken their toll.

But his hallmark Messiah Politics didn't scupper him, either. That's true even if you count the effects of the second Iraq War. We'll come to that, of course.

The conundrum remains: how did this vacuous post-Baby Boomer become a rather admirable - at any rate a stubborn - warrior? Peter Hennessy, who knows British government better than anyone, remarked to Michael Cockerell for the latter's March 2007 BBC2 series Blair: The Inside Story, that "destiny is knocking on the door every day for Tony Blair". It was a telling jibe at a politician who cares about his own grand role in history's unfolding, and it also implies - rightly - that Blair has spotted several destinies in a rather promiscuous way. For Geoffrey Wheatcroft, in his lively polemic Yo, Blair!, Blair was - is - a half-mad liar and a criminal who runs a junta from Downing Street. His account and mine could not be more different in tone or purpose. [[1]]

Not that I celebrate very much of Blair. I think he was a mistake we shouldn't have made. He has somewhat redeemed himself, but in the oddest way.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Blair's religion and his idealism combined with his deep desire to be a historic figure to produce an all but incredible effect. Blair's militarism, and especially the Second Iraq War - the war against terror - was the apogee of a career which otherwise looked as though it was doomed to failure. I have especially enjoyed the way the vast number of dreamers who fell in love with Blair in 1997 have now abandoned him. Meanwhile, within the minority who always thought he was a humbug there is a minute cadre who have at last found some merit in him. I am part of that small crew. It all makes an amazing story and I find it hard not be drawn to the man who was at the heart of it.

This book looks at the career of a man who seemed at first to be all style and no substance, and then turned out to be substantial in the most unexpected ways. I hope I have useful things to say about that. However I claim to be most valuable in my account of the way Tony Blair governed, and how the business of conducting government was strongly influenced both by his style and what turned out to be his substance.

So I hope this is a book which will be read not merely by Blair-obsessives, but by anyone interested in modern government. It is intended to fill the gap which is left even when one has read other books on Blair, and watched - say - Michael Cockerell's series on his premiership. What's more, I hope it will be of interest to those who wonder if Blair's style is simply a matter of what modern politicians have to be like. My new Conclusion, especially, addresses that.

Blair, the poor PM

Tony Blair did not disappoint those of us who thought him absurd ten years ago. It is hard to figure him as a success. He (and Gordon Brown) raised taxes, and seem to have wasted a good deal of the money. He worked hard for peace in Northern Ireland, as all Prime Ministers do, and when the Northern Irish are good and ready, there may be good government there. It's very hard to see what difference he actually made there, not least because there is real difficulty in assessing whether he is a brilliant negotiator (as some knowledgeable people say) or a useless one (as some others aver).

For much of his premiership Blair proved himself wrong-headed where he wasn't hapless. He did nothing to stop the banning of fox-hunting or fur-farming, probably because he wanted some politically traditional red meat to throw over the back of the sledge to his restive backbenchers. He at first dismantled the Tory legacy in the health service and had, later, messily to reinstate the Tory reforms. On education, health and pensions we can be fairly sure that Blair was in his heart and mind a high-spending Tory of sorts, and only cowardice, confusion and his fear of Westminster and Whitehall stopped him being effective in pressing on with reform. That, and Gordon Brown's deadening hand.

Constitutionally, he devolved power to the fringes, presumably on the assumption that they didn't much matter and that Labour would still rule them really. He began by talking nonsense about the lack of democracy in arrangements for the House of Lords and then, much too late, understood that it would probably be a mistake to make it an elected chamber. That was about the time, in 2003, when he abolished 1400 years of tradition and the office of Lord Chancellor in a press release. Much later, he may have been corrupt in his part in the Cash for Honours saga. His most important failing will never achieve the prominence it deserves. He was frightened of the merits and value of Westminster and - this is too little discussed - of Whitehall. He circumvented them. So what's to like?

The satirists acquit the PM

The oddest thing about Blair is that he remains a mystery, and a personally attractive one. The satirists, for instance, find it hard to pin anything on him. Blair never sorted out his teeth or his hair and was always surprisingly fey. He seems to have a fatal love of flashy villas. He never overcame a certain diffidence when caught on the hop by The People. He could never work out what his accent ought to be. For all his vaunted informality (and in administration it was very damaging), he was best when he had control of the stage. And yet there seems to be rather little to mock. The worst that might be said is that comic writers find him eager, hapless and remote. That's what we saw in portrayals by Robert Lindsay in a rather silly TV show, The Trial of Tony Blair and Anthony Head in Little Britain. The Trial of Tony Blair had little real bite, as the Tony Blair caricature sleepwalks toward condemnation via an appalled visit to a comically awful NHS hospital. In Little Britain, in which the Blair figure was assailed by persistent homosexual badgering, his bemused innocence about homosexuals seems to match what we are told about the real Blair in The Spin Doctor's Diary, by Lance Price, whose antennae we can trust on such matters. [[2]]

Peter Mandelson was at pains to convey to Michael Cockerell his belief that Blair was not so much ruthless as steely, and if true it is an attractive distinction. And yet few of us, and few even of the Prime Minister's reluctant admirers, would follow Mandelson in his assertion that Blair was right to describe himself as "a pretty straight sort of guy". And of course, we feel, most of us, that in this matter neither man is any kind of guide. All the same, Armando Iannucci's The Thick of It rather made the point: it concentrated its ire on apparatchiks like Alastair Campbell and various party gofers, as though Blair himself would not provide much juice.

Michael Sheen gave us a rather new Tony Blair in Stephen Frears' The Queen, as one might perhaps have guessed from his 2003 account of the Granita negotiations in The Deal. This Blair is admirable in parts. The movie seems a plausible account of the Prime Minister's involvement in Diana's obsequies. Granted the anti-Establishment nonsense

which he probably believed before he came into office, and the nonsense by which he was probably surrounded (by his own choice of course), he seems to have got the right end of the stick about things. So we had the horror of his remark about Diana's being the "People's Princess" - one of the truly sick-bag moments of our time. But we had, at least as importantly, the evolution in a few days of a man who helped preserve the dignity of the monarchy. Wheatcroft may be right that Tony Blair bullied the Queen, but the outcome was more or less what she and her people needed. (Wheatcroft says Blair pushed himself forward to read a lesson at Diana's funeral, as he was to do later, in the case of the Queen Mother's funeral. Unattractive stuff, to be sure.)

Rather similarly, Peter Stothard's 30 Days, an account of the run-up to the second Iraq war, shows both the worst and the best of Blair. [[3]] He emerged from that book as an attractive man running perhaps the least attractive - and informal - government in history.

Almost all my admiration for Tony Blair flows from the peculiarity of his courage in his militarism. Throughout, he defended his record wholesale. He insisted he was right, as George Bush was right. And, crucially: "It's worse than you think. I believe in it. I am truly committed to dealing with this, irrespective of the position of America." [Link]

Blair might be bluffing us, or staring us down, for fear of worse. Still, I don't think he can be faulted in his demeanour in his conduct of the second Iraq war and its aftermath. And that remains true even if one supposes that he lied or was "disingenuous" so as to gain support for his war, which seems to be Lord Butler's influential view. [Link]And it remains true even if Blair was wrong as to the merits of the war. This isn't a question of whether he is being entirely honest with us, or was right. It's a matter of whether he has shown strength and dignity. The alternative to the view that he has deported himself well in this matter is to say he is either simply acting or is simply mad. I am inclined to reject those ideas.

Messiah Politics in practice

Mr Blair's Messiah Politics are most obvious in his status as two quite opposed figures: as campaigner and warrior, as I tried to show in the 2006 chapter, Messiah Politics in practice. Because so much has happened, I have re-written this chapter for this pamphlet. It is in three parts, dealing, respectively, with Blair's work on poverty in Africa, on global warming, and his "just wars".

Messiah Politics were nascent in Blair's earlier and lesser role as moderniser of the knackered and nasty Tory old Britain he pretended he had inherited. Deeply embarrassed by his own middle class origins, he pandered to the worst of the chippiness which still lurks in the British.

On global poverty, Africa and climate change, he has been as much a dissident campaigner as a statesman. On Afghanistan and Iraq, and even as the Prime Minister of a country that is being bombed by terrorists, he has been and remains a military leader.

In all these large areas, he has sought virtue as well as showmanship. As Peter Mandelson told Michael Cockerell, to understand Blair you have to see that in any given situation, "He first of all thinks of what is the right thing to do, and then the best way to communicate it". Private Eye was right to cast him as an ambitious vicar. The essence of this proposition is that Tony Blair has turned doing good and saving the world into a political mission. This was put best, I think, by John Lanchester in a 2003 London Review of Books piece, in which he wrote "&. Thatcher never claimed to be Good, just Right. Blair's political personality has always been predicated on the proposition 'I am good.' His dewy-eyed, slightly fumbling sincerity - his brilliantly articulate impersonation of earnest inarticulacy - has all along been tied to this self-projection as a Good Man." [Link]

But even an aspiration to virtue and sense of destiny don't quite make messianism. To be messianic is to flirt variously with heroism and martyrdom. Tony Blair has taken these two out on dates, even if he has not quite done the decent thing by them. But he is a politician, after all, and we are describing a messiah-lite, not the real thing.

However, his Messiah Politics were not merely theatrical or rhetorical. They were about power.

How to make power personal

Tony Blair undertook what was very nearly a democratic coup, as we explore in the 2006 chapter How to make power personal. Tony Blair's Messiah Politics would be an obvious enough affair if they were a matter of vision and aspiration.

But his administration - his use of the levers of power - was also powerfully influenced by his Messiah Politics. He had various aspirations. He wanted to be transformative. He wanted to be theatrical. But he was determined, too, to be the font of power.

He had more of it than any previous Prime Minister. Many a President would envy the range of his authority. He had something of the monarch about him, and not least by running a court. Indeed, the real opposition to him came from the opposing court of his own Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is also true that Tony Blair would often retreat from any serious row with his own backbenchers, so there is a charge of political cowardice to be made against him. Blair was to some extent hemmed in, at least on the home front.

Tony Blair was not unique in keeping power close to his office, the den, in Number 10. He wasn't unique in moving party hacks close to the centre of the administration. But on all sides we have fascinating accounts, from dramatists as much as from official inquiries and serious commentators, that he took informality to new levels. A new term, Sofa Government, was invented to capture the phenomenon. This is important to the Messiah Politics thesis because it speaks to strengths and pitfalls of politics by personal passion and belief. If the leader is prone to messianism, his den will almost by definition be unable to provide the checks and balances we normally trust to produce good government. Geoffrey Wheatcroft again and again calls Blair's government a cabal, a junta and a regime. That seems ordinary knockabout stuff until one remembers that cabals, juntas and regimes exert power by force. In the case of Blair's Sofa Government nobody in Westminster or Whitehall seriously challenged the new absence of system.

The Monarch of the Den

So we had a monarch in Number 10, and he was constrained on domestic welfare reform not merely by Gordon Brown and the occasional feistiness of the Labour backbenchers. His European dreams were shipwrecked by reality, and by Gordon Brown. It is an important part of my argument to say that Blair was also condemned to failure because he did not realise that the traditional machinery of government could have served him pretty well, if only he hadn't lacked two crucial things. One was an appreciation of the machine at his disposal. The other was consistency and steadiness in the policy platform he would have liked to see implemented. His style of government - his inability to allow ministers and ministries to flourish - made any serious domestic government all but impossible. In some fascinating passages, Lance Price tells us that quite early on it was hard to get ministers to defend the government's policy outside their own bailiwicks. Surely this was their only line of resistance to their exclusion from making wider policy, either within their ministries or Cabinet?

It is very likely the quest for something he could do - and do his way - which led to the particular form of Messiah Politics "Late Blair" embarked on.

Tony Blair hoped to govern by the exercise of a charisma in which virtue and popularity were perfect partners. His greatest difficulty has always been to express and embody the idea and fact of representative democracy. He didn't like Whitehall and Westminster, and hoped instead for some electrical as well as electoral connection between himself and the will of the People. One of his silliest rhetorical flourishes was the remark that New Labour was the political wing of the British people. This was to suggest several things which were nonsensical. Firstly, perhaps: that there was a mass movement of which New Labour was the expression. Secondly, perhaps: that New Labour spelled the end of politics since it was so big a tent that all the others could be folded up.

"A Personal Note", and the Masochism Strategy

There have been several moments at which Tony Blair declared himself willing to listen to the people, but it is a much more recent trope to assert that unpopularity is in a way the point of government. It was an attractive feature of his Masochism Strategy broadcast meetings with members of the public, as I wrote in my account of one such in the 2006 A Personal Note. But it was only in the dying months of his administration that he really squared the circle. In March 2007, he invited sixty citizens to Number 10 and the only interesting part of the exercise is that they were there to hear him lecture them on the difficulty of being in government. As he told the BBC at the time, "Politicians are in the listening business because they end up standing for election, but when they are in government they are also in the deciding business, and that is when life gets more difficult." [Link] He said people needed to understand why politicians pursued a particular policy, and it was important people "didn't end up thinking they [politicians] were doing it for reasons of sort of whimsy or just sheer bloody-mindedness".

Indeed, early 2007 was characterised by an understanding on all sides that public consultation - especially when it is not much more than opinion polling - was not very much like government, and maybe of not much use to it. On road pricing and the future of nuclear power, two very different consultation processes seemed to come unglued. In the first case, an online petition to Number 10's website attracted hundreds of thousands of pricing refuseniks, but can hardly have added

much insight. In the second, a High Court judge determined that the consultation process had been flawed because the government had not handed out much information (though oceans of the stuff was available to anyone who cared). The more important truth was probably that serious and useful consultations tend to be exercises for the professional campaigner and other vested interests more than for the public, and that they are important but not popularly democratic.

These were some of the signs that the uniqueness of Tony Blair's government - at once populist and secretive - had been exposed as roundly inadequate.

From Bambi to Messiah Politics: the Blair narrative

It is obvious that Tony Blair always had buckets of charm and possibly of charisma. In religious terms this is the special power that grace gives certain earthlings. Less transcendentally, the idea captures something like magical glamour, a sort of hyper-attractiveness. I think, a little controversially or even weirdly, that Blair was so modern he was post-modern. I explored these ideas in the 2006 chapter From Bambi to Messiah Politics: the Blair narrative.

The essence of the accusation is that Blair was so in love with his role as the source of a narrative - a story, a message - that he thought inventing and delivering these was very like real life. He confused reality and perception, just as his media managers understood that "the People" do. It is quite possible that historians and analysts will regard this as the bit of Blair's politics - his Messiah Politics - which define him. It is also possible that he and his administration will be most famous for the damage they did to public utterance. And they will certainly be remembered for having brought the reputation of government utterance to a new low.

I was in good company in pursuing these themes, with Matthew Parris and Peter Oborne pioneering the way, though I naturally hope to have pressed on further. I mean that Blair wanted to be "transformative" in a way captured by Caspar David Friedrich in his painting, Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog" (used as the cover of the 2006 book).

Modern Messiahs: pop stars, priests and pressure groups

When Clare Short told Michael Cockerell that Blair was "delusional" she was expressing a view which is widely held. I think he was well short of delusional, but that he has always had a tendency to over-reach himself.

Some of it is natural in any politician. The thriller writer Richard North Patterson has a spin doctor assert that all politicians are romantics: "To be a good candidate, a good leader, you have to be. Because then you not only want to make a difference, you imagine that you can." [[4]]

Blair went further. He wanted to be a bit of a Byron, or a Dylan, or a Bono. I explored these themes in the 2006 chapter Modern Messiahs: pop stars, priests and pressure groups. This is merely to say that he was the post-Baby Boomer, post-Beatle, Cosmo, life style magazine Prime Minister. We had it coming.

Blair was a master communicator, and a master of the communications nexus, so his work was a unique mixture of the charismatic and the media-savvy. Naturally, in the way of the post modern, his genius was to convey the possibility of substance when there was often only emptiness. This powerful man with his high ambitions made sure the spotlight stayed on him. He was offering us a series of performances, but when a policy floated by, he wanted to be seen to have been its progenitor. He wanted to rebrand Britain, with himself as representative of the new style.

Tony Blair is the most mysterious Prime Minister in British history. He is also the most actor-like. He out-Macmillans Harold Macmillan. He is almost certainly the most duplicitous, and the one least committed to telling "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth". As John Cole, the veteran political commentator, has remarked on this subject, the "whole truth" part is the hardest to obey. It is the part in which Mr Blair seems most deficient.

Blair and post modern "truth"

One of his lines of defence was at one point, "I only know what I believe". Another was, as Wheatcroft reminds us, "I may be wrong, but that is what I believe". And then there is the often repeated view that Tony Blair does not understand that things do not become true or good merely by his believing them to be so. Even less can a thing be made to happen by his merely wishing it so, as he admitted ruefully to a House of Commons select committee in July 2002. [[5]] Wheatcroft reminds us that the novelist Doris Lessing usefully noted: "He believes in magic. If you say a thing, it's true. I think he's not very bright in some ways".

This all matters because most politicians have traditionally justified policy on the grounds that it can be demonstrated to make objective sense or because it is too popular not to be done. In Messiah Politics, however, the leader's own beliefs are paramount, however at variance with objective reality or - if push comes to shove - popularity.

Blair's Age of Aquarius

Should we distrust him the most when he declares himself to care the most? Is not this matter of "caring" always an area where we suspect cant? Are we not doubly suspicious when we hear it from a man who, we suspect, hardly knows what the truth is, and cares even less? In two 2006 chapters (The Evolution of Messiah Politics, and Modern Messiahs) I tried to tie Blair's personal background with that of his Age of Aquarius generation in which passion matters more than reason. "All you need is love" is their underlying creed, along with, "Make love, not war". This has been an age in which passion excused most things, and absence of passion condemned reasonableness. It is some comfort that we deserved Blair: he didn't foist himself on us. British politics was waiting for a Blair when he came along. Figuring his tendencies as generational and cultural somewhat excuses him. He wasn't to blame for the zeitgeist which formed him and which he read so well.

The Camelot Factor

Glamour is charisma for the televisual age. Blair had it to a degree. In the 2006 chapter The Camelot Factor, I take a look at the emergence of this new politics. The most interesting peculiarity is perhaps that John F Kennedy and Bill Clinton are much more obvious precursors of the Blair phenomenon than, say President Ronald Reagan. One could put it this way: Reagan was a straight-up ham actor who became a straight-up politician. Clinton and Blair, though, inhabited their new roles. They were, as it were, Method actors. They weren't mere dissemblers or posers, one suspects. They were the first to believe their own publicity.

No-one has achieved the holy grail of politics: no-one has become a John F Kennedy. It may be that no-one can recreate the naivety of the oh-so-knowing 60s. Then again, Kennedy was mythologised as a dead man, and was a leader who did not have time to become tarnished in his lifetime. Blair, on the contrary, began on an amazing and unsustainable high and stayed on long enough to peter out. And we need to remember that Kennedy achieved rather little, beyond starting the Vietnam War. Had he lived, he would have attracted the opprobrium of the liberals who went on to adore him, just as Blair has done.

A taste of the Conclusion

My new 2007 Conclusion looks at the future of Mr Blair's Messiah Politics. It argues that some of the tackiness of Mr Blair's style may continue. We can expect his successors to give us a good deal of guff on Africa and climate change. We may confidently expect tasteless parading of consciences. But where Blair was bold - in supporting President Bush - we will probably see rather more timidity. Very importantly, Mr Blair's successors are likely to claim that they would like to govern in a more old-fashioned way. Let's hope so.

Messiah Politics in practice

(An update of the 2006 chapter Messiah Politics in practice which deals with poverty in Africa, climate change policy, and Mr Blair's support for President Bush's militarism.)

Saving the World 1: Ending poverty in Africa

Africa - and the world stage

There has been a good deal of speculation that Tony Blair's big ambition is to hang on to power until June 2007, so he can shine at the annual G8 meeting. Actually, this may be hard to do as the world's aid and AIDS campaigners repeat their 2006 accusations that the rich world's leaders have reneged on the high promise of the G8 meeting at Gleneagles in 2005. Some debt has been cancelled, some more aid paid over: but double-counting, missed deadlines, and budgetary fudges have covered what is probably a failure of will.

Future historians may view Gleneagles as a landmark for the poor in Africa. It more certainly marked the high water mark of Tony Blair's aspirational politics: he was the inspired host to the world's traditional great powers as they had their annual bout of conscience. It was also the moment when he brilliantly portrayed himself as the embattled realist, and sold

the idea of his being the man who had done all that was humanly possible for virtue, and could do no more. Having flirted with the poverty campaigners all summer, he casually remarked that government and campaigners were not natural bedfellows.

It does not take much of a sceptical mind to understand how little happened that summer. In December 2006, the OECD said that except for help to Iraq, Nigeria and victims of the 2005 tsunami, aid flows were "essentially flat". [Link] Even great increases might not have done much good. Policies on aid evolve slowly, not necessarily improving as they do so, as the fashions of political correctness and economic policy ebb and flow. Africa's poor may start to do better soon, and the reason may indeed lie in changes of mind in the West that have occurred over the last decade. It may as much be China's need of raw materials. We'll see.

A scar on Blair's conscience

Mr Blair has made some extraordinary moves on the issue of Third World development in general, and especially aid to Africa. In particular, he has made it his personal mission. "On Africa, I fear my own conscience and I fear the judgement of future generations", he told the audience at the launch of his Commission for Africa, timed to coincide with Red Nose Day 2005. He has always used the kind of passionate appeal to moral imperatives that an ardent campaigning outsider might apply to whip along a complacently indifferent government. But this was different.

"Apply snake-oil"

The point is that when Mr Blair has addressed African poverty it has been as a snake-oil Messiah. I mean that he ought to have known, and may have known, how far his deeds would fall short of his words. The recipes he doled out stood no chance of working. Doubtless, on a personal level, he cares (more or less) about the issue.

It is far too late to argue successfully that Britain's government should steer clear of trying to help the Third World. The public has come to accept, and probably even to demand, that its foreign policy should include a small development and humanitarian aid dimension. Indeed, British aid has historically been regarded as being of rather high quality. At its best, it has seemed canny and even mildly successful, not least because of Britain's colonial legacy. The development ministry has a track record of knowing well the people who receive its support, and of being able to talk to them in robust fashion.

But Mr Blair has gone much further than any previous Prime Minister. He has talked as though he wants his country to be more generous. Worse, he has talked as though he now knows the recipe for successful aid; as though it were to be found, say, in The End of Poverty, by Jeffrey Sachs. [[6]] And, perhaps worst of all, Blair seems sometimes to support the idea that the model for successful development is an essentially leftist one, as Make Poverty History would have us believe.

Mr Blair, like many campaigners and much of the public, has looked out on the poor of the world and seen them in essentially the same way as an old-time Labour politician might have seen the working class. From this perspective, the answer would be to tax the middle classes (ordinary Western citizens) and redistribute this wealth through state channels to provide state welfare services for the benighted poor in Africa.

This is not the place for a long discussion of the difficulty of helping people in countries run by corrupt, inefficient or nasty elites. Still less is it easy to discuss the sheer difficulty of helping poor African countries even given more good will than has even been shown. The macroeconomics of aid-dependent, fragile states are not attractive or amenable. The authoritative Overseas Development Institute is valuable, sobering, and not entirely gloomy on the subject. But this is the place to say that the naively vicarish do-gooding instincts of Tony Blair - at times magnified into positive messianism - did not seem to have been reined in by what should be his sophisticated understanding of what states can and cannot do.

He was volunteering to be locked into a pretty conventional approach by his sponsorship and membership (with Brown) of the Commission for Africa. In retrospect, it is fascinating to note that its report was guided by Sir Nick Stern, a treasury official and former World Bank chief economist. This is the same Stern who would go on to produce a rather dreamy report on climate change. On Africa, Stern worked with co-writer Paul Vallely (an old colleague of Bob Geldof's and a senior figure in aid charity circles). The commission was bound to produce the same sort of kindly analysis as the Brandt and Brundtland commissions that had preceded it. The Commission for Africa's report isn't awful, but it is also no more than a restatement of a wish list that is at least decades old. It calls for good government for Africa, so that wealth creation can flourish and be shared. It wants Westerners to be generous, to dismantle trade barriers, and to encourage good leadership. Hard-nosed development specialists have queued up to say that this is all fine, but the calls for African leaders to play their part have been made often enough before. When we see Africans delivering their part it may be

easier to persuade Westerners to deliver theirs.

PM or campaigner?
Tony Blair confused the role of churches and campaigners with that of government, and his role as Prime Minister with that of a campaigner.

Mr Blair's job as PM is to be judiciously sceptical. His role is to point out the degree to which he is the guardian of the public purse, as well as the possessor of a tender heart. Indeed, he has done so. Forgotten amongst his subsequent rhetoric was his real-world election manifesto pledge of May 2005. Mr Blair was elected then on a promise to achieve the very modest target of delivering 0.7 per cent of the national Gross Domestic Product for aid by 2013. This is the UN-endorsed minimum standard for virtue in this area, and has already been achieved by Scandinavians (and will surely come nowhere near being delivered by the US).

Blithely ignoring his electorate and his mandate, Mr Blair went much further in late 2005 - further even than his Commission. Or at least, he affected to. His endorsement of the Make Poverty History and the Geldof/Bono rhetorical tendencies was dangerous folly. The views of these campaigners do not constitute a simple or coherent platform, but they all demand not only lots of taxpayers' money (the Commission wants that), but also the kind of development model for Africa that would be recognisable, and agreeable, to the French left or to British trade unionists (a leftism the Commission largely avoided). Bono and Geldof do not tell us much about their rationale for Africa. But it seems likely that they believe in the wisdom of Jeffrey Sachs.

Here we see a problem with Mr Blair's Messiah Politics. In this case, they make him swerve leftwards, at least in front of some audiences. While on domestic issues, or within the EU and the World Trade Organisation, Mr Blair is a fairly good neo-liberal. But once he talks about the Third World on TV, he goes all mushy and falls into line with the kind of thinking he has beaten into the ground on other fronts.

In any case, to do good he would have needed to appoint a strong and senior minister to the overseas development department and allow that person to evolve a thoughtful and realistic set of proposals. Such a minister might have been able to make it clear that there was policy as well as lofty design behind his government's thinking. This is, of course, complicated by the fact that Gordon Brown insisted on sticking his oar into policy, as Richard Dowden of the Royal African Society has pointed out. [Link] Brown did so in a way that brought glamour to his own person and office. Between these two Courts, the development and statement of serious policy by a serious ministry was all but impossible.

Gordon Brown and Tony Blair have portrayed themselves as supplicants as well as politicians, as campaigners as well as "world leaders". They compounded these mistakes by behaving rather badly on the world stage. They played the role of dissidents and moral leaders among those tough governments - the US and Japan especially - that are sticking by older, less compassionate - less socialist - views of the obligations of the rich to the poor. In fact, there were real disagreements amongst the World Bank's finance ministers about the efficacy of the particular mechanisms for debt reduction which Brown promoted as our representative.

The Blair/Brown approach was to lecture their fellow Western leaders on behalf of the supposedly moral British citizens. It was to play the ardent, morally driven protestors - bearded and sandalled in their souls - as they operated on the inside. It is as though they could squat on the pavement and strum their guitars to a Yoko Ono/John Lennon songbook, and simultaneously sit with the unreformed grown-ups running the rest of the world in their pre-Beatle, Edwardian stiffness.

The voter and aid
It might be argued that there is an ordinary political reason for Tony Blair's interest in Africa, and for his endorsement of Make Poverty History's sort of argument. He might believe that the campaigners do not so much wield virtue or wisdom, as hold the key to millions of votes. Opinion polls would not support this contention: the Daily Telegraph has reported that a very high percentage of Britons believe much aid is wasted. [[7]] This is a traditional sort of result, and one might wonder if the scepticism over aid is a cover for public meanness. Mr Blair ought to admit that the prejudices of his voters lag well behind his messianic aspirations. More important, he ought to have said to the Live8 audiences, and to those millions who texted their support for Live8: "Before you can make poverty history, you have to make it political. Persuade your fans to join parties and vote. Even if you do, I fear you will be outvoted by the sceptical. But that's the democratic way."

The aid sceptic may indeed be able to take comfort from an emerging sense that the aid campaigners have overplayed their hand. Their G8 triumphalism produced a good deal of commentary challenging both the platform of the British aid campaigners, and the Blair/Brown approach to selling it to the Americans. It may even have gone down badly - not least with the rest of the G8 leaders - that Bono and Geldof were overtly presented as the gatekeepers of Gleneagles. It was these celebrities who were shown giving press conferences from the very scene of the G8 conference. Surely it must have struck viewers as odd that it was the judgement of these singers - and not the judgements of the UN, of democratically elected politicians - that were foregrounded by Mr Blair?

In short, this branch of Mr Blair's Messiah Politics may become positively unpopular, even with his successors. If it really was a ploy - perhaps one designed as a counterweight to his militarism - it may fail. If it was genuinely felt, Mr Blair may be given the chance to prove that he is serious about it: he may have to defend his newfound enthusiasm for leftish campaigning to openly sceptical audiences. This may especially become the case if he retires from politics and gets into saving the world in a serious way.

Saving the World 2: Global Warming

More snake-oil

The July 2005 G8 meeting's response to what was billed as the second big issue of concern was probably ideal for Mr Blair as a snake-oil Messiah politician. In 2004 he had been full of passion on climate change. In 2005, he almost glowed with his newfound realism. He changed gear and portrayed himself as someone who had tried, and failed, almost as though he had been heroic. That's life with Messiah Politics, and either version plays well.

Now, in 2007, we are beginning to see what the successors to Blair are going to make of the issue. The truth is probably that they will find as little serious room for manoeuvre as he did.

Back in 2005, in Gleneagles, Tony Blair was able to say that he had worked to bring Mr Bush into line with climate change alarmism, and had wrung a bit of language from the president about the human involvement in global warming. That Mr Bush had not become any great fan of limits on greenhouse gas emissions had to be glossed over, as indeed did the failure of the entire world to do very much on the subject. As with Africa, G8 was a high point in Blair's mission to save the world, but also marked a new phase: the world-weary statesman admitting his failure.

Mr Blair's own inability to deliver much of a British response to the problem became clearer as 2006 wore on. UK emissions of greenhouse gases in general are flat and those of carbon dioxide are slightly rising. In snake oil messiah mode, Tony Blair had promised they would fall substantially (and still by nothing like enough to show green virtue). In particular, in October 2006, the publication of the Stern review of the economics of dealing with climate change produced a torrent of media coverage. [Link]The Independent and other like-minded activists thought it was the report which would change everything. But the other side were also emboldened by the report, which occasioned probably the first serious wave of analysis as to what actions were politically possible (globally or locally) and what benefit to the world's climate they might bring, if any. The process had already begun, with the 2005 publication of a House of Lords economic committee report which cast doubt on the idea that action to "control" the climate could be easy or certainly effective. [Link]

A reality check

Lord (Nigel) Lawson, and others, undertook sceptical critiques of Stern's work in the journal, World Economics. Sir Nicholas can hardly complain that these arguments came from trivial sources: he is on the editorial board of World Economics. [Link]

Indeed, Stern was launched at the end of a several month period during which Tony Blair's own advisers and their acolytes amongst broadcasters started to develop a more realistic discussion of policy. David King himself seemed to say, in a BBC Radio 4 Today broadcast in 14 April 2006, that even a good deal of policy success could not fend off quite severe climate change. So the core problem is to know whether policy advocates believe a little pain could bring a great gain, or not. This is not the place to recount the ins and outs of these arguments. [[8]] The point here is to show the gap between the rhetoric and reality of Mr Blair's Messiah Politics. Even more, to point out the gaps between his own various utterances: between his high-flown and his expedient rhetorics.

By 2007, Mr Blair's views on climate change were of small interest to anyone. Gordon Brown, on whom attention was focused, declared himself a fan of action and (as was predictable) has done little that was very Stern-like. "Green taxes" as a percentage of the total tax-take have fallen under New Labour's decade in power and in his 2007 budget Gordon Brown did little to make up the ground. [Link] He is reported to have crushed some unrealistic policy ideas of David Miliband, the environment secretary. Instead, Brown made a shrewd move. In March 2007, he proposed that there should be statutory (legally-binding) targets for the phased reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and that they should follow independent advice (from a body with no power). Like his much-vaunted independence for the Bank of England, this neatly shifted blame for any policy failure away from himself. But this climate change device was deftly shifty, since no law can ever bind future Parliaments. Stern had done the politicians one big favour. By stressing how important international action was, he allowed the UK to shelter behind the inadequacies of the EU and nearly everyone else too.

The collision of virtues

Of course, Mr Blair's Messiah Politics on climate change are wholly irreconcilable with his Messiah Politics on global poverty. Leave aside the poverty of argument in much of the global-warming alarmism and the policy suggested to tackle it, there is simply no chance that the poor of the world can become much less poor without huge amounts of greenhouse gases being unleashed. This problem is what one might call a "collision of virtues". Stern's answer to the tension between his two agendas seems mostly to be that the rich world should pay for the poor world to grow in a post-carbon way. That may well be morally right, but it begs one of the large questions which Stern raises but doesn't begin to address: Is there any sign at all that the world's publics are willing to do anything inconvenient or costly about climate change? Another question matters too: Does anyone seriously believe Stern when he says that 1 percent of GDP will solve the problem? If it were true, then our problems are nearly over. Nearly, but not quite. Compared with our expenditure on health (about 8 percent of GDP), or education (about 5 percent), this may seem like small beer. Still it's well over double what we currently spend on overseas aid (0.4 percent, though Blair promised it would soon be 0.7 percent). And this, remember, from a kindly country whose extraordinary toleration of high taxes seems to be close to its limit.

Climate change becomes popular

Blair's snake oil Messiah Politics on climate change were surprisingly mainstream. It's a subject that had galvanised our political masters a decade before he came to power. The idea that mankind may be over-heating his planet through the emission of greenhouse gases hit the mainstream in the late 1980s. It immediately found a champion in the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who thereby endorsed and licensed the enthusiasm of successive environment ministers and their officials for the subject. Lord Lawson told Martin Durkin, the film-maker, that she did so as a way of promoting the nuclear power whose success would lessen the country's dependence on the Middle East and the miners. [[9]]

The upshot was that the largest, most complicated, most life-changing idea of our time was given a berth at the heart of British politics, driven by the newly emboldened officials in that least powerful of departments.

In the Late Blair period, in September 2004, the PM said he thought global warming mattered enormously. [Link] That December, he declared himself a disciple of everything Professor Sir David King, the official chief scientist, had been saying, presumably including the latter's increasingly intemperate utterances about the turpitude of the US and Mr Bush. Reality kicked in a fortnight or so later at Davos, an annual corporate and government jamboree at which important people promise to listen to their inner voices, become inclusive and caring and so on. [Link] Mr Blair chose this moment to reiterate how important global warming was, and then said that no measures could be taken which seriously threatened economic growth. By suggesting that this is the one immutable fact of political life, Tony Blair was leaving open whether he thought that, in dealing with global warming, Westerners were up for great changes in their way of life, or whether - quite differently - climate change could be tackled without such changes.

Blair gets practical

However much Tony Blair yearns to save the planet, it is very doubtful whether Western electorates would tolerate having their habits (travel, for instance) or their affluence (economic growth) dented by the need to maintain - if it were possible - the climate they inherited from their grandparents.

In his 2005 Davos speech Tony Blair seemed to recognise that democratic leaders have a very limited ability to go further than their electorates will go. This understanding was compounded in 2007 by a clear sense that he wasn't a natural fan of carbon restraint when he gave Sky News an astonishingly relaxed interview on his family's flying habits. [Link]But if he did care, would not courage and leadership consist in persuading the reluctant voter to fall in line behind his vision? Failing that, might he not do his democracy a great service by saying that, while he personally now accepted that "Something Ought To Be Done", the electorate was too ignorant, stupid, or selfish to take this particular message on board?

In short, if one is to be messianic, oughtn't one to embrace the role of preacher and teacher, and thereafter (when wisdom has fallen on deaf ears) the role of martyr? It seems fair to argue that, on global warming, Tony Blair has fancied the messianic role, but only for as long as it has not required any hint of martyrdom.

Saving the World 3: Just Wars

Put away the snake-oil

We've looked at two very large areas of policy - global poverty and climate change - in which Tony Blair was a snake-oil Messiah. He was making false promises and did nothing serious to deliver them. In his militarism, we can see the most important element of Mr Blair's Messiah Politics. But in this area, there is much less sign of snake oil.

We have witnessed Mr Blair's passion for vast and grandiose, virtuous and even godly, policies. We have found that he likes to be seen as the transformative individual. But we have also seen him pursue policies that are popular with "virtuous" people of a certain sort. With his just wars, though, and especially in the case of Iraq, he has done something that is unpopular with precisely the people the rest of his Messiah Politics appeal to. It is also, of course, something that is loathed by many Muslims.

I say, there is little snake oil here. But we have noted that he could not resist rhetorical excesses when discussing the value of might put at the service of right, especially when he deployed what even Peter Riddell, that most measured of commentators, called "messianic language". [[10]] That was in the wake of the 9/11 outrages, and Blair told the Labour party conference there was a fight for freedom "from the deserts of North Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountains of Afghanistan: they are our cause". He seemed to imply that the points in between the obvious trouble spots were also in his action plan.

Messiah Politics hits its stride

Had he lost contact with Planet Earth? Had his successes, especially in the former Yugoslavia (nuanced as they were), and Sierra Leone, unhinged him? Or had he re-written the canons of foreign policy ethics for a new age?

Especially in the Iraq war, Tony Blair delivered the fullest product of his Messiah Politics. The UK joined the US venture because Blair wanted to, and was able to make it happen. He had nothing like enough national support for the war to be called popular. He had accustomed ordinary people, Westminster and Whitehall to conducting foreign affairs pretty much as he liked since too few Members of Parliament and even fewer officials in the relevant ministries would put themselves on the line for their private or professional convictions.

As he took us into the Iraq war Mr Blair deceived Parliament and the electorate by omission, if not by commission, especially as to Weapons of Mass Destruction. The stern but kindly Riddell supposes that Blair believed what he said. So, one might suggest, there was a double deception: first of himself and then of anyone else he dealt with. Blair seems to have made up his mind at least by the summer of 2002 that the US would probably go to war in Iraq, and that the UK should be alongside them. [[11]]

Why hasn't Blair been punished?

The war was and remains very unpopular with Blair's backbenchers and many opposition MPs, to say nothing of the rest of the country. And yet one might say that he has paid a surprisingly small price in Parliament. The May 2005 general election saw his majority dented, but the rest of the year had several elements of personal triumph to compensate. Insofar as there is any desire to punish Mr Blair over Iraq, it has hinged on the way he seems to have hijacked the parliamentary process. To a remarkable degree, fewer people seem to want to punish him for the policy itself.

This may be because, to a greater degree than one might expect, people rather admire his determination to unseat Saddam Hussein. Determination on any matter can have the effect of inspiring or shaming electorates. Part of the explanation for people's tolerance of the policy may be that it is natural to be supportive of UK troops who are under fire, and that makes it awkward to be very blunt with the man who put them there. And it may even be that the London bombings of 7/7 and 21/7 of 2005 hardened the British people against Islamist terrorism, but also made them stick up for the Prime Minister. It is certainly arguable that Tony Blair ought to be punished electorally for his absurd assertion after the bombings that the Iraq war had nothing to do with them. It was wildly less than honest for him to pretend he knew

one way or the other.

From Bambi to hunter

We can see the evolution of his Messiah Politics as they applied to foreigners. In 1997, Tony Blair came to power promising an "ethical dimension" to foreign policy, which was quickly popularised to something even New Labour had not promised: an Ethical Foreign Policy. It's not a phrase we hear much of nowadays, though, arguably, we have seen in Mr Blair a Prime Minister who has done, or has at least tried to do, more good in the world than any before him.

When he arrived at Number 10, he was amazingly naive. During his first month in office, he told his fellow EU leaders, "Mine is the first generation able to contemplate the possibility that we may live our entire lives without going to war or sending our children to war." [Link] As Bambi, he seems to have believed that the Tories had a rather nasty foreign policy, run by arms traders and the scions of imperialism. New Labour hoped that Britain could have a foreign policy that would encourage nice foreigners and not seek horrid old national self-interest. We would, one felt he wanted to believe, become more like Sweden, or Denmark. Modern, liked, modest.

Blair's no Tory

To those of a Tory bent, this all seemed rather unfair of New Labour. Many of us had thought the Foreign Office rather too timid, if decent. Our belief was that it was full of romantic Arabists and speakers of foreign languages who tried, on the whole, to civilise their own country at home by pointing out the complicated merits of foreign ways. We thought of Tory Foreign Secretaries such as Messrs Carrington, Hurd and Rifkind as representing the most genteel and thoughtful sort of Briton, trying to play cricket in a world that was playing polo with severed heads. They could have replied, of course, that it is they who understand the brutalities of the world, and the limits to effective action by civilised people.

Tory fastidiousness had various strands. One was a cynical matter of understanding that the British were weak and not determined and the foreigner pretty well everywhere either strong or nasty or both and often very determined. "You love life, and we love death" is an Islamist mantra and its nihilism has a ghastly force. So there was a lot of cynical realism in the Tory decency. The Tory inclination has been to be polite to foreigners, but to leave them to their own devices for fear of achieving something worse. Dictators, in this view, are often quite good for British interests. There was a hard sort of Tory who said, cynically, that we had no reason to shed blood in squabbles that couldn't do us much harm, however they turned out. But they could more nobly have claimed that, quite often, it was very hard to be sure which side the angels were on anyway. And from time to time, even modern Tories abandoned their lofty pragmatism (never an easy combination) and got militarily involved in the world (in the Falklands, in Iraq in 1991, in Bosnia in the mid-90s). Within all that, there was a widely held view that whilst the US was usually on the side of the angels, its deployment of force tended to be long-range, half-hearted, and short-lived. The aftermath of the Iraq war has emboldened the holders of this view.

What's left?

Labour, and especially Labour's heartland, doesn't have the Tory back-story. It is genetically anti-colonial, anti-military and anti-American. The country was forcefully reminded of this when Nick Cohen's What's Left? was published in 2007. [[12]] Around 1997, what had been a softly-softly, nuanced Tory Foreign Office had to be depicted by New Labour as something much tougher (how else to proclaim a revolution?). The tenor of Blair's Bambi-period utterance on Ethical Foreign Policy was that Britain would abandon gunboat unilateralism and become a part of a consensus, part of the multilateral, multicultural, blue-beret UN worldwide peace and harmony initiative. On the whole, then, being "ethical" was broadly thought to be a matter of being nice, and not throwing one's weight around. It was at the quietist end of being ethical. It was entirely compatible with a strand of Toryism.

In the end, of course, Britain, even with its new ethical foreign policy, became a thoroughgoing partner of the US in its policy in former Yugoslavia. To do so, we had to abandon consensus: one cannot simultaneously have a US and a UN or EU view of what it is right to do. So it turned out that we would both behave ethically, and abandon almost the entire Bambi doctrine on how that was to be defined. In short, Tony Blair became right-wing in his foreign policy: he became a variety of Neo-conservative.

The change was seen at its most clear in a speech in Chicago in April 1999 entitled "The Doctrine of the International Community" in which he remarked: "The most pressing foreign policy problem we face is to identify the circumstances in which we should get actively involved in other people's conflict". [Link] There was a delicate dance going on: realism and respect for the sovereignty of nations on one side; some sort of over-riding human rights agenda on the other. President Bush was to go further, with his doctrine of "pre-emptive" action, first articulated in June 2002, but kept his perspective more obviously self-interested.

Blair the Bush-ite

After 9/11, in 2001, Blair was, surely, a fully signed-up Bush-ite. [[13]] He may have wished for more partners, more planning, more boots on the ground, more continuity with the existing regime's organisational structures, or whatever - we may never know. We know he argued for such things: but he may have been acting. In the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, he certainly believed that, however things might unfold, one had to pick a side. One might bring influence to bear, but the Bush administration was a juggernaut that was not being driven by Britain. As it hurtled along, the only decision was whether or not to be on board. I cannot fully decide whether this line of argument exculpates my own support for Bush, or Blair's. But it is an explanation for it anyway. It is worth stressing because it leaves the UK supporters of Bush rather little room for manoeuvre: we signed up for the second Iraq war knowing that its aftermath might well be poorly-managed and it certainly stood a chance of being catastrophic. There was some comfort to be had from the view that catastrophe was perhaps inevitable with or without the West's invasion. It is tempting to say that Blair fell for the neo-con line (and the invasion-lite version of it) in spite of face-to-face briefings with an army of advisers. But Blair's few supporters amongst the public came to share his conclusions similarly in the face of torrents of contrary opinion. The point is worth making because it is important that Blair's few supporters should accept that they (we) are in it with him.

The neo-con doctrine has important elements of Messiah Politics: at the very least it was a call to go beyond a shuffling, incrementalist, minimalist sort of diplomacy. It was premised on meeting fire with fire, on making a difference even at the expense of making a difference for the worse. It suggests that the right thing is sometimes brutal, uncertain, unpopular. For good or ill, this suited Blair's unique political take.

Surely, throughout the run-up to the Iraq war, any sensible person knew that Saddam Hussein was not a serious menace to the West, and probably not even a serious supporter of terrorism around the world. But he was a vastly important regional factor, capable, in every word and deed, of bolstering the medievalism under which the leaders of the Middle East shelter from the modern world, and deprive their people of liberty and well-being. It was a bizarre truth that only by regime change could the US demonstrate that it hated dictatorship. It is possible that doing so with a small occupying force at least might force intelligent people to accept that the US was not acting imperially. Only by acting, even if without UN authority, could the US show that it understood that the UN had become a pawn in the dictator's game plan.

In the event, in early 2007, things have gone badly in Iraq and only fairly well in Afghanistan. Iran and Syria and theocratic Islam look like the victors of the Iraq war of 2003 and perhaps of the Israeli-Lebanon conflict of 2006. Those of us - presumably including Mr Blair - who preferred to be with Mr Bush rather than against him have to face a daunting calculus. How many tens of thousands of Iraqis have to die before we accept that we made a mistake? Of course the answer depends to some extent on what class of good news will eventually unfold, and when. It also depends on what would have happened without it. An uprising somewhere in Iraq? The assassination of Saddam? A violent succession? The answers to such what-ifs can't be known and the answers to such moral sums are never certain and may be long delayed. The supporters of the Bush/Blair approach comfort ourselves that the arguments of many of those who opposed the toppling of Saddam were merely routine anti-Americanism and the old quietism of the super-realist and the super-idealist. But even that is awful: have all those Iraqis died because armchair warriors didn't like the Tory and Labour lefts?

Should Blair have accepted that in the Middle East and the Muslim world in general dictators are necessary to keep unruly, undemocratic, totalitarian theocrats under control? Were we taking a mad gamble on Iraq's people, and lost? Or is there an even crueller realist insight? Namely that the rulers of Middle East and Muslim countries always know that the US will be an irresolute policeman. Do they know, in short, that whatever the merits of their rule, or of the US's interventions, they have stronger resolve than the West? One suspects that President Bush, even in early 2007 and in spite of much advice to the contrary, believes that a strong and determined US can achieve a good deal. Tony Blair is not letting us know whether he agrees. But then he never did, or could, altogether take us into his confidence..

Blair the resolute

Blair's wars, and especially the Iraq war, showed his people a Tony Blair we did not previously know was there, though we had seen something of this side to him in the former Yugoslavia. In this one field - military operations - he seemed to be capable of discerning what he thought was right, steamrollering it through his own supporters and the opposition, and then contemplating all the horrors of military action with a coolness that could look heartless. He avoided gush and therapy-speak. He didn't affect to feel people's pain. Indeed, it was noteworthy that he was not seen visiting the bedsides of wounded soldiers; not filmed watching military coffins carried off aeroplanes, and succouring the bereaved. Perhaps he did these things in private. Perhaps he has suddenly discovered a dislike of the mawkish and vulgar. Perhaps he could not face them, and who cares if he could not?

Odder, though, is the boldness and the fierceness with which he defended his actions, and stared down his critics. He

even told the party he had discovered that his job was to be unpopular. As a pronouncement, this was shocking only in how late on it came: it revealed how absurd his view of leadership must have been until then. But it was amazing the degree to which, having come to that conclusion, he got on with being blindingly unpopular. He set to it with a will.

It is tempting to argue that it was a young egotist and moralist who arrived at 10 Downing Street in 1997, determined to be vastly popular and to transform his sad old country in all sorts of ways. He wanted to do good. Bit by bit, he came to realise that this country's strengths were, remarkably, just as the conservatives had always said: it was, by turns, old, unfussed, therapy-proof, scruffy, stalwart, edgy and muscular. The British are proof against orthodoxy and reform, unless they are absolutely necessary. Tony Blair was still keen on doing the Right Thing, if one could discern it, and - more difficult - be seen to deliver it, but there were remarkably few candidates for this work. Politics and economics determined that there was little room for the luminously virtuous. He doesn't seem to have gone looking for good to do overseas, but when it came along, it found a ready recognition and response in him. That there was good to be done in the former Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone was clear to Tony Blair, and it was clear to him, too, that this was one sphere of activity in which he had a relatively free hand. For a start, Gordon Brown did not have his own "big clunking fist" on the relevant levers of power. Secondly, the British are always more up for a good war than they are, say, for even higher taxes or a smaller welfare state. And thirdly, in military affairs a Prime Minister has if not absolute power at least the initiative. In Blair's case especially, Parliament, insofar as it mattered, could be managed.

It is possible, and probably true, that Mr Blair found something dizzying and exciting about rushing around the world as a statesman; here was a stage on which he could perform. He could be tired, bold, hated, lonely, popular, unpopular - whatever. They were all great roles.

It is wholly unclear whether Tony Blair became genuinely noble as he helped fight the West's wars. His behaviour had the makings of nobility - and the appearance of it. However, the saint is always open to the charge of self-delusion. The hero is open to the charge of seeking fame. The martyr is open to the charge of ultimate self-aggrandisement. Tony Blair may have been little more than egotistical when he sent British troops to war. Or he may have been much more manly than it is given to most of us to be. The question arises with any leader, but especially with Tony Blair because we are pretty sure that he is a man who loves acting and applause. He has devoted a vast amount of his ministry's energy to creating certain effects. It is inevitable that when we see him at work, we are watching for smoke and mirrors - and that this is all the more true when we see him as a spotlit figure in the fog of battle.

It is possible though that he was a man who wanted to do right and the opportunity at last came along in a form he was uniquely equipped to respond to. It is at least a reasonable reading of his personality and his politics that this was one of the few good effects of Mr Blair's Messiah Politics.Conclusion

I hope I have persuaded you (both in the 2006 book and this 2007 update) that there is "Blairism", and it is his Messiah Politics. Tony Blair is one third moralist and one third actor - a situation which leaves only a third for the demanding practical business of being a serious Prime Minister.

This book is concerned with how Tony Blair gained, deployed and kept power. It is about a vacuous man who turned out to have an extraordinary steeliness. It is of course also about a man who was remarkably free of anything like ideas or ideology but who toyed with several large themes before becoming, in one area alone, extraordinarily bold and doctrinaire in his actions. So it is about the oddity at the heart of Blair's premiership: in foreign affairs, where he showed leadership and courage, he not only abused democracy the most, but committed what nearly everyone thinks is a colossal blunder.

Most of it was pure guff. Mr Blair has presented us with several versions of his destiny. He has seemed to believe in magic. He never perhaps understood and much too late told us about the strict limits to his capacity to modernise Britain, to transform the welfare state (let alone anything so humble as manage it), to solve climate change or enrich Africa. And yet - and here is the crucial mystery - in one area, foreign affairs, this strange man conceived a worldview even more giddy in its goals, and requiring real brutality, and in this one area he has been unflinching. Bold, brave and - most say - also unsuccessful. Very messianic, indeed. To complete the picture, only a martyrdom is required. But Blair hasn't been made to pay for what are widely seen to be his mistakes.

I meant to convey a sense of what Blair has done to the office he held, and its relations with the rest of government. That's to say, of course, that he has to a remarkable degree made government depend on his vision, energy, style and management. He has bypassed Parliament, the Cabinet and Whitehall and put in their place a febrile process of Sofa

Government with special emphasis on the merit of managing The Message.

It is legacy time for Mr Blair and he seems in early 2007 to have messed it up. He has backed away, probably wisely, from the kind of rhetoric he once deployed on Africa and climate change. Had he left in early 2006, it would have been on a high, with only the Iraq war as a serious blight. If he had admitted failure there, he might even have manufactured quite a satisfactory martyrdom, and that would play nicely to his Messiah Politics. Instead, he seems quite inscrutable on this most important issue. He may believe he did well and it may be that events will justify him. At its giddiest, Messiah Politics may yet play well for Mr Blair's reputation.

Right now, though, the Bush/Blair Iraq policy is generally perceived to have been a disaster. Miraculously, there is little incentive for the major political players to punish Mr Blair over Iraq, whatever their inclinations. Gordon Brown's camp is even more implicated in the policy than the Tory leadership. The opposition to the war by the Lib Dems rather proves the point, too, that it is very seldom easy politics to criticise British military action once it's afoot.

Will anyone inherit Messiah Politics?
The question, after a decade of Tony Blair's premiership, is whether he has been a one-off and a warning or - on the other hand - merely modern and an example?

Will anyone ever again display and deploy loftiness of ambition on the Blair scale? Will anyone seek to be so powerful and powerfully transformative? I am inclined to doubt it. Blair spectacularly failed in almost everything grand that he tried to do. Afghanistan and Iraq remain an open book, but hardly anyone thinks these cases offer encouragement to the bravest sort of interventionist ambition. Probably the US and certainly the UK will aim to be less lonely in their actions. What's more, the leaders of these countries are far more likely to seek consensus cover for their actions than did Bush or Blair. And without loneliness, there is no Messiah Politics.

We are not likely to see a repeat of Messiah Politics at their most extraordinary. But there is much in their day to day operation which could remain, and be very bad.

Let's take the business of the personal and politics. We might begin with how politicians who aspire to the leadership now have to be interesting and attractive as private human beings. We want public figures to show their soul. They must be capable of being celebrities, and like soap stars.

Selling Cameron
David Cameron himself might have been a hard sell. His being posh is a mixed blessing, though it may be much more of a blessing than is often supposed. His looking like a rather smug squire out of a Gainsborough portrait doesn't seem to go against him. But Cameron was of course required to prove that the Tories were capable of being nice: he has surely achieved that, whatever bland superiority some of us detect in his face.

David Cameron may or may not deploy the disability of his child as a deliberate political advantage. Indeed, it is a sign of the times that we assume he may have done so. And it is a sign of the times - in a way a good sign - that such matters are not kept discreetly out of the public gaze. It would be tasteless to speculate on Cameron's motives. All the same, we can be fairly sure that it has played well for him that he has been able (quite frequently) to make it clear that he is a hands-on parent with every reason to care about the National Health Service on which he proudly and also humbly relies.

Gordon Brown puts on a friendly face
It is interesting that Cameron's biggest political problem is to seem kindly and real and ordinary. It is a problem very like that faced by Gordon Brown, who is widely presumed to be about to succeed Blair and quite possibly precede Cameron. Brown's marriage and fatherhood - and perhaps especially the death of an infant child and the infirmity of another of his children - have all brought some public sympathy for and empathy with a man who was more admired for his policies (if at all) than for his personality. He has contrived, indeed, to be remarkably unpopular, with some of the most telling criticisms coming from within his own party. His own team and supporters seem to hope that Brown can prove himself popular by delivering real policy rather than spin, in short by being substantial. Of course, he has the advantage that he will come to power, if he does, on the back of Blair's electability. But he may go on to win elections in a way unique to

him: namely as a man who was able to prove himself able in office without having first having to prove himself popular at the polls. It is even possible that power will become him: he has hated having to lurk behind the arras and it is quite possible that he will become much more user-friendly when his lifetime dream is realised. He is, for instance, already capable of a largely unnoticed wittiness in the Commons, and that may develop. We'll see.

It surely possible that Brown will be as irritating a premier as he has been a Chancellor. It may be a matter of taste and little more, but I find Brown's awesome seriousness, his humourless assumption of our assumption of his rectitude, wearying. He has been widely billed as being a man of massive intellect, a thing we have yet to have demonstrated by anything he has told us or been seen to do. His media interviews have not been very interactive. He has been notorious for double-accounting and double and triple announcing his taxation wheezes.

Can we have our politics back, please?
All of that one might call the ordinary business of politics. But Brown has been into a fair amount of Messiah Politics himself. He has declared himself passionate on world poverty and climate change, and looked contrived as he proved one of these points on walk-about in Africa. Cameron has the advantage over both Blair and Brown that he looks good when he seeks to look natural. He even pulled off a very silly stunt with huskies in Norway.

Cameron and Brown seem to understand that it is required to develop at least that part of Messiah Politics that parades its conscience on at least some iconic issues.

Is it possible that either man will share power? Both men seem to understand that Blair has governed very badly. There has been a good deal of leaking from the Brown camp to suggest that he wants to abandon Sofa Government, and intends to have a stronger Cabinet of people chosen for their talent rather than their biddability. [[14]] He has also, more ambiguously, made a good deal of his determination to rely on Whitehall officials more and on politically-appointed advisers rather less. Thus, he has let it be known, there will be no repeat of the constitutionally-dubious empowerment of appointees, and no repeat of the special measure by which Blair gave some of his outsiders control over civil servants. Actually, though, Brown may be speaking with forked tongue. The civil servants on whom he seems to want to rely are all people who have come into the Chancellor's orbit over the past ten years. They may have become less independent-minded than the outsider might like.

Lord Turnbull, last-but-one Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, made some outspoken remarks to the Financial Times in March 2007. [Link] He spoke of Brown's "Stalinist ruthlessness" and how Brown belittled his Cabinet colleagues with "more or less complete contempt". He is the latest of an unbroken succession of three former holders of the post to discuss what one of them called New Labour's "coup" against "the processes of government". Turnbull's remarks were novel in their lack of coding and their severity, and in being directed specifically at Brown's management of the Treasury and its maw, which Turnbull knew well since he had also been the Permanent Secretary there. We will need to watch carefully to see whether, under the guise of seeking Whitehall impartiality and steadiness, Gordon Brown hasn't actually committed the greater sin of politicising the civil service.

What has David Cameron made of all this? In Spring 2007, we know rather little. But if his conference speech of October 2006 is anything to go by, we may be in luck. He said he was determined to be a Prime Minister of the old school, with a strong Cabinet and an end to the presidential style of government. There are some signs that he means what he says. There is of course a Cameron spin machine at work, and he is being "presented" in the Blair-ite way, but he has also initiated a series of policy reviews under people who have real strength in their own right. It may be possible to bury the output of people like John Gummer (environment review), Stephen Dorrell (health service review) and Ian Duncan-Smith (with his social justice work), but it is more likely that they can put down markers which he will have to live with. This is the antithesis of Blair's Messiah Politics, in which he alone had the vision, the power, and the glory.

Shall we put it like this? Messiah Politics was too lofty, too inspired, too manipulative and too inefficient to be sustainable politics. But it deployed the media brilliantly. It understood the phoney charisma which now works. And it understood the cheap sentimentality of the worst of our times. We may well see its offspring as politicians increasingly reach for the ersatz and the tacky. So thank you, Mr Blair.

[1] Geoffrey Wheatcroft, Yo, Blair!, Politico's, 2007
[2] Lance Price, The Spin Doctor's Diary, Hodder & Stoughton, 2005

[3] Peter Stothard, 30 Days: A month at the heart of Blair's War, HarperCollins, 2003
[4] Richard North Patterson, No Safe Place, Ballantine, 1998
[5] [A web search of "announcement is merely the intention" will take you there.]
[6] Jeffrey Sachs, The End of Poverty: How we can make it happen in our lifetime, Penguin, 2005. RDN reviewed this book for www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk
[7] Rachel Sylvester and Andrew Sparrow, Vast majority thinks Africa aid is wasted, poll shows, Daily Telegraph, 4 June 2005.
[8] RDN has material on these themes at www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk.
[9] The Great Global Warming Swindle, WAGtv for Channel 4, 8 March, 2007. RDN reviewed this work at www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk
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[14] Patrick Hennessy, "The year of our Gord 2007", The Sunday Telegraph, 31 December, 2006

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