

1. PŘÍLOHY

1.1. Text originálu

Always with us?

Through the New Labour years, with low inflation and steady growth, most of the country grew richer. Growth since 1997, at 2.8% a year, was above the post-war average, Britain's gross domestic product per head was above that of France and Germany, and she had the second-lowest jobless figures in the EU. The number of people in work increased by 2.4 million. Incomes grew, in real terms, by about a fifth. Pensions were in trouble but house price inflation soared, so that home-owners found their properties more than doubling in value and came to think themselves prosperous indeed. One study showed that Britain had a higher proportion of dollar millionaires than any other country. Family budgets are by definition tricky things to generalize about but by 2006 analysts were assessing the disposable wealth of the British, defined by the consultants KDP as 'the money people can really put their hands on if necessary' at £40,000 per household. The wealth was not evenly spread geographically, averaging £68,000 in the south-east of England and a little over £30,000 in Wales and north-east England. But even in historically poorer parts of the UK house prices had risen fast, so much so that government plans to bulldoze worthless northern terraces had to be abandoned when they started to become worth quite a lot. Cheap mortgages, easy borrowing and high property prices meant that millions of people felt far better off, despite the overall rise in the tax burden. Cheap air travel, which had first arrived in the seventies with Freddie Laker, gave the British opportunities for easy travel both to their traditional sun-kissed resorts and to every part of the European continent. A British expatriate house-price boom rippled slowly across the French countryside and roared through southern Spain. People began to commute weekly to their jobs in London or Manchester from villas by the Mediterranean. Small regional airports grew, then boomed.

Clever, constantly evolving consumer electronics and then cheap clothing from the Far East kept the shops thronged. The internet, advancing from colleges and geeks to the show-off upper middle classes, then to children's bedrooms everywhere, introduced new forms of shopping. It first began to attract popular interest in the mid-nineties: Britain's first internet

café and internet magazine, reviewing a few hundred early websites, were both launched in 1994. The following year saw the beginning of internet shopping as a major pastime, with both eBay and Amazon arriving, though for tiny numbers of people at first. It was a time of immense optimism, despite warnings that the whole digital world would collapse because of the ‘millennium bug’ – the alleged inability of computers to deal with the last two digits in ‘2000’, which was taken very seriously at the time.

In fact, the bubble was burst by its own excessive expansion, like any bubble, and after a pause and a lot of ruined dreams, the ‘new economy’ roared on again. By 2000, according to the Office of National Statistics, around 40 per cent of Britons had accessed the internet at some time. Cyber frenzy swept the country, and business; three years later, nearly half of British homes were connected. By 2004 the spread of broadband had brought a new mass market in downloading music and video online. By 2006, three-quarters of British children had internet access at home. Simultaneously, new money arrived. The rich of America, Europe and Russia began buying up parts of London, and then other attractive parts of the country, including Edinburgh, the Scottish Highlands, Yorkshire and Cornwall. For all the problems and disappointments, and the longer-term problems with their financing, new schools and public buildings sprang up – new museums, galleries, vast shopping complexes, corporate headquarters, now biomorphic, not straight, full of lightness, airy atriums, thin skins of glass and steel. This was show-off architecture for a show-off material culture and not always dignified, but these buildings were better-looking and more imaginative than their predecessors had been in the dreary age of concrete.

At a more humdrum level, ‘executive housing’, with pebbled driveways, brick facing and dormer windows, was growing across farmland and by rivers with no thought of flood-plain constraints. Parts of the country far from London, such as the English south-west and Yorkshire, enjoyed a ripple of wealth that pushed their house prices to unheard-of levels. From Leith to Gateshead, Belfast to Cardiff Bay, once-derelict shorefront areas were transformed. Supermarkets, exercising huge market power, brought cheap meat and factory-made meals into almost everyone’s budgets. The new global air freight market, and refrigerated lorries moving freely across a Europe shorn of internal barriers, carried out-of-season fruit and vegetables, fish from the Pacific, exotic foods of all kinds, to superstores everywhere. Hardly anyone was out of reach of a Tesco, a Morrison’s, Sainsbury’s or Asda.

By the mid-2000s, the four supermarket giants owned more than 1,500 superstores. This provoked a new political row about their commercial influence but it also spread consumption of goods that had once been luxuries. Under Thatcher, millions had begun drinking wine. Under Blair they began drinking drinkable wine. Their children had to borrow to study but were more likely to go to college or university and to travel the world on a 'gap year', a holiday from ordinariness which had once meant working, occasionally abroad, but which by now might mean air-hopping across South America or to the beaches of Thailand. Materially, for the majority of people, this was a golden age, which perhaps explains why the real anger about earlier pensions decisions and stealth taxes failed to translate into anti-Labour voting in successive general elections.

Not everyone, of course, was invited to the party. New Labour's general pitch was to the well-doing middle but Gordon Brown, from the first, made much of its anti-poverty agenda. Labour in particular emphasized child poverty because, since the launch of the Child Poverty Action Group, it had become a particularly emotive problem. Labour policies took a million children out of relative poverty between 1997 and 2004, though the numbers rose again later. Brown's emphasis was also on the working poor, and the virtue of work. So his major innovations were the national minimum wage, the 'New Deal' for the young unemployed, and the working families' tax credit, as well as tax credits aimed at children. There was also a minimum income guarantee, and later a pension credit, for worse-off pensioners.

The minimum wage was first set at £3.60 an hour and rising year by year. (It stood at £5.35 an hour in 2006.) Because the figures were low the minimum wage did not destroy the 2 million jobs, or produce the higher inflation, which Conservatives and others claimed it would. Employment grew and inflation stayed low. It even appeared to have cut red tape, since the old Wages Councils had to inspect businesses more frequently than the new Inland Revenue minimum wage inspections. By the middle 2000s, the minimum wage covered 2 million people, the majority of them women. And because it was uprated slightly faster than inflation, the wages of the poor rose faster. The situation may change, particularly if unemployment worsens, but it appeared to have been an almost unqualified success, enough for the Conservative Party, which had so strongly opposed it, to embrace it under Michael Howard before the 2005 election.

The New Deal was funded by a windfall tax on privatized utility companies. By 2000, Blair said it had helped a quarter of a million young people back to work and it was being claimed as a major factor in lower unemployment as late as 2005. It was clearly less of a factor than the huge increase in the size of the state: in the Blair years, state employment grew by 700,000, funded by record amounts taken in tax. And the cost of goading, coaxing and educating people into jobs was very high. The National Audit Office, looking back at its effect in the first Parliament, reckoned the number of under 25-year-olds helped into real jobs could be as low as 25,000, at a cost per person of £8,000. All those new jobs which had to be created to help people into jobs came at a price. A second initiative was targeted at the youngest of all, the babies and young children of the most deprived families. Sure Start was meant to bring mothers together in family centres across Britain – 3,500 were planned for 2010, ten years after the scheme was launched – and help them to be more effective parents. A scheme in the United States had shown great success and Sure Start was another initiative backed in its essence by the Conservatives, though Blair himself appeared to be having second thoughts, as the most deprived families declined to turn up. He believed in sticks as well as carrots.

Abroad, the government's anti-poverty agenda concentrated on Africa. In 2004 Blair initiated the Commission for Africa which worked to persuade the world's richest countries to back a wide plan for economic, political and social reform, supported by debt relief. By then it was estimated more than 50,000 people were dying every day from famine or bad water in Africa and the continent's AIDS epidemic was wiping out much of a generation. In 2005 Brown, struggling to persuade the United States to back his plans for an international finance facility – a global piggy bank – agreed to raise Britain's aid contribution to 0.7 per cent of GDP. Washington declined to follow suit. Enormous strength was added to the campaign by Make Poverty History, one of the two biggest examples of street politics in the Blair age. Here was extra-parliamentary action which showed people's readiness to engage with politics-as-unusual, a residual idealism. There is a tradition in Britain of moral protest and practical action for famine abroad. Oxfam had started as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief in 1942, campaigning to persuade the wartime government to lift its blockade on German-occupied Greece, where the Nazis were allowing people to starve as they diverted food to their army in North Africa. (Churchill took the view that the starvation was the fault of the

occupying power and the blockade should stay – the argument was strikingly similar to those made about sanctions imposed on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in the Major and Blair years.) What made the later movement different was the fusion of celebrity, music and television to raise unheard-of sums.

It began with the Irish rock star Bob Geldof, and Midge Ure of the band Ultravox, who were shocked by news coverage of the 1984 Ethiopian famine by the BBC’s Michael Buerk. They formed a thirty-strong ‘supergroup’ to make a fundraising Christmas single, ‘Do They Know It’s Christmas?’ It raised £65 m and Geldof managed to persuade Margaret Thatcher to waive VAT for the famine victims. This success was followed by Live Aid, a linked global concert held in London and Philadelphia in 1985. It was watched by an estimated 1.5 billion people in 160 countries, making it by far the biggest world television event to that point. Geldof continued to campaign on Africa, joining the Commission for Africa. Having sworn he would never try to repeat Live Aid, Geldof did so in 2005 with a host of rock stars, including U2 and the (briefly) reformed Pink Floyd, breaking more records for global audience numbers. This time, though, the focus was on lobbying the richest countries, meeting as the G8 under British chairmanship at Gleneagles in Scotland.

On 2 July 2005, some 225,000 people marched in Edinburgh calling for debt cancellation to help Africa’s poorest countries. A week later a £28.8 bn aid deal and a debt cancellation programme for eighteen countries, plus new guarantees to fund anti-HIV drugs, were indeed agreed at Gleneagles. Because parts of the rich world remained hostile to opening up trade to Africa, essential to helping the continent recover, some campaigners were disappointed. And the announcement was greeted with cynicism by the anti-globalization movement which was also a feature of these years. Geldof said, however, that ‘never before have so many people forced a change of policy onto a global agenda’ and his fellow campaigner, Bono of U2, claimed the deal would save the lives of 600,000 Africans, mostly children. The legacy of Live8 and the Commission for Africa will continue to be debated for years but it was a unique alliance between civil organizations, churches, rock musicians, actors, writers – and politicians. Both Blair and Gordon Brown were consciously trying to use the hundreds of thousands of marchers and the glamour of the rock stars to nudge other world leaders towards agreement, and they were at least partially successful. It showed what their partnership could do.

Poverty is hard to define, easy to smell. In a country like Britain, it is mostly relative. Though there are a few thousand people living rough or who genuinely do not have enough to keep them decently alive, and many more pensioners frightened of how they will pay for heating, the greater number of poor are those left behind the general material improvement in life. This is measured by income compared to the average and by this yardstick in 1997 there were three to four million children living in households of relative poverty, triple the number in 1979. This does not mean they were physically worse off than the children of the late seventies, since the country generally became much richer. But human happiness relates to how we see ourselves relative to those around us, so it was certainly real. Under their new leader David Cameron, the Conservatives declared that they too believed in the concept of relative poverty, as described by a left-of-centre commentator, Polly Toynbee. And a world of work remained below the minimum wage, in private homes, where migrant servants were exploited, and in other crannies. Some 336,000 jobs remained on ‘poverty pay’ rates.

Nevertheless the City firm UBS believes redistribution of wealth – a phrase New Labour did not like to use in case it frightened middle-class voters – had been stronger in Britain than other major industrialized countries. Despite the growth of the super-rich, overall equality slightly increased in the Blair years. One factor was the return to means-testing of benefits, particularly for pensioners and through the working families’ tax credit (which in 2003 was divided into a child tax credit and a working tax credit). This was a personal U-turn by Brown who in Opposition had opposed means-testing. As Chancellor he concluded that if he was to direct scarce money at the people in real poverty he had little choice. More and more pensioners were means-tested, eventually some 66 per cent of them, provoking a nationwide revolt and persuading the government to back down and promise an eventual return to a link between state pension rates and average earnings. The other drawback of means-testing was that a huge bureaucracy then had to track people’s earnings and try to establish just what they should get. Billions were overpaid. As people getting tax credits rather than old-style benefits, did better, and earned a little more, they found themselves facing demands to hand back money they had already spent. Many thousands of civil servants were hurriedly sent to try to deal with a tidal wave of complaint, and the system became extremely expensive to administer. It was also hugely vulnerable to fraud, with gangs taking

over people's identities (13,000 civil servants alone) and exploiting 'a culture of overpayment'.

In the New Labour years, as under John Major, a sickly tide of euphemism rose ever higher, depositing its oily linguistic scurf on every available surface. Passengers became customers; indeed everybody became customers. Bin-men became refuse operatives, people with mental disabilities became differently-abled. And the poor became the socially excluded. There were controversial drives to oblige more disabled (and sometimes shirking) people back into work. The 'socially excluded' were confronted by a wide range of initiatives designed to make them, in essence, more middle class. In theory, Labour was non-judgemental or liberal about behaviour. In practice, responding to the darkest areas of deprivation, an almost Victorian moralism began to reassert itself. Advice on diet, weight-loss and alcohol consumption followed earlier government campaigns on AIDS and drugs. Parenting classes were much trumpeted. And for the minority who made life hellish for their neighbours on housing estates or in the streets, Labour introduced a word which became one of its particular gifts to the language of the age, as essential as dotcom or texting, the Asbo.

The Anti-Social Behaviour Order, first introduced in 1998, was an updated system of injunctions for what earlier generations called hooligans. These had to be applied for by the police or local council and granted by magistrates. To break the curfew or restriction, which could be highly specific, became a criminal offence. Asbos could be given for swearing at people, harassing passers-by, vandalism, making too much noise, graffiti, organizing raves, flyposting, taking drugs or sniffing glue, joyriding, either offering yourself as a prostitute or kerb-crawling in your car to find a prostitute, hitting people, drinking in designated public places . . . almost anything in fact that was annoying or frightening. More bizarre-sounding ones included giving an Asbo to an entire part of Skegness to allow police arrests of troublemakers there; a 13-year-old girl being banned from using the word 'grass' and an 87-year-old man being ordered not to make 'sarcastic remarks' to neighbours and their visitors. In one case a woman who kept trying to commit suicide was given an Asbo to prevent her jumping into rivers or canals.

Though almost every story about an unlikely-sounding Asbo as reported in newspapers turned out to have a reason behind it, Asbo-spotting became a minor national

sport and there were fears that for the tougher children, they became a badge of honour. In their early years they were much mocked by Liberal Democrat and Conservative MPs for being ineffective and rarely used by local authorities, as well as being criticized strongly by civil libertarians. Since breaking an Asbo could result in a prison sentence, it meant extending the threat of prison to crimes that before had not warranted it. Yet the public when polled strongly supported Asbos and as they were refined and strengthened they were gradually used more frequently, becoming almost routine. Like the minimum wage, Bank independence and some of the anti-poverty initiatives they seemed to be a part of New Labour Britain that would stick. At the time of writing, 7,500 or so had been given out in England and Wales (Scotland followed in 2004 with its version). Was this part of a wider authoritarian and surveillance agenda changing life in the country?

The War on Privacy

At an educated guess, the British are currently being observed and recorded by 4.2 million closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras. Professor Clive Norris of Sheffield University, who did the educated guessing, has pointed out, 'That's more than anywhere else in the world, with the possible exception of China. It's one for every 14 citizens.' When they first appeared in the early nineties, gazing beadily down from a few high-security buildings, these remotely staring cameras were pointed out as novelties. They are now in almost every sizeable store, looking down at key points in most big streets, in railway and underground stations, buses, housing estates and even from the fronts of private homes. Londoners are said to be picked up on CCTV cameras on average 300 times a day; their cars are filmed and tracked by the cameras set up for the capital's congestion charge. The Home Office has spent three-quarters of its crime prevention budget on CCTV cameras and the face-recognition and 'smart' technology that goes with them. The number of mobile phones is now equivalent to the number of people in Britain; with global satellite positioning chips, they can show where their users are, and the same of course goes for GPS systems in cars (by 2007 Britons were losing the art of map-reading). There are also more than 6,000 speed cameras on British roads.

Britain's information commissioner Richard Thomas warned that the country had become a 'surveillance society'. He thought future developments could include microchip implants to identify and track people; facial recognition cameras fitted into lampposts; and even unmanned surveillance aircraft over Britain's towns. Thomas suggested this could lead to discrimination and harassment: 'As ever more information is collected, shared and used, it intrudes into our private space and leads to decisions which directly influence people's lives.' Certainly, if being watched makes us good and safe, the British are now the goodest, safest people in the history of the world.

Who watches all the CCTV coverage? Court cases often demonstrated that either there was no film kept, or that to spot a face took many police officers many weeks. Though this can increasingly be done electronically, other kinds of surveillance were being done in person. A new force of council tax inspectors were given powers to enter any home in England and take photographs of any room, including bedrooms and bathrooms, on pain of a £1,000 fine for refusal or obstruction. This was to assess improvements including patios, conservatories and double glazing for revaluation purposes as soon as the government gave the go-ahead for such a revaluation, which was planned to include extra charges for people living in agreeable areas, or who could park their cars outside their homes. It was reported in early 2006 that discussions had taken place with the civil servant in charge of the surveillance programme about selling on the information his men had gleaned to insurance and mortgage companies. Paul Sanderson, director of modernization for the tax inspectors, said he thought privacy was 'an old-fashioned concept' and called for all the details, including photographs, to be shown online.

If anything could be more intimate than the insides of everyone's homes, it is their DNA, with its clues about heredity, vulnerability to disease and much else. In 2003 the law was changed to allow the police to take and store the DNA of anyone arrested for any imprisonable offence, whether or not they were later convicted. Previously the police had had to destroy the samples of anyone found innocent, or whose case was dropped. Three years later, by which time 3.6 million samples were being held, Tony Blair said the database should be extended to everybody: 'The number on the database should be the maximum number you can get' and there was 'no problem' with the general public providing their DNA as part of the wider fight against crime.

By then the public also knew they would be expected to give biometric data – iris recognition and perhaps eventually DNA – for new compulsory identity cards, due to be introduced from 2008 when people applied for new passports. David Blunkett had promoted the idea of compulsory ID cards despite a hostile reaction from his predecessor Jack Straw, the Chancellor Gordon Brown, and initial caution from the Prime Minister. But he won his fight in government essentially because he convinced Blair the technology was becoming safe, and that ID cards would be popular with the majority of voters. These cards would carry a range of personal information, forming yet another new database, the National Identity Register. The issue provoked rebellions in Parliament before and after the 2005 election, but seemed to have been finally resolved by a thirty-one-vote majority in the Commons in February 2006. The new cards would cost citizens at least £93 each though ministers did not initially make it an offence to fail to carry one at all times. What were they for? To combat fraud and crime, to make life easier for government, and for individuals to make it harder to lose money through ‘identity fraud’. Yet compulsory ID cards would probably not have passed through Parliament had it not been for the terrorist threat.

Seven Seven

On 7 July 2005, at rush-hour, four young Muslim men from West Yorkshire and Buckinghamshire, Hasib Hussein, Mohammed Sidique Khan, Germaine Lindsay and Shezhad Tanweer, murdered fifty-two people and injured 770 more by blowing themselves up on London Underground trains and one London bus. The report into the worst such attack in Britain later concluded that they were not part of an al Qaeda cell, though two had visited Pakistan camps, and that the rucksack bombs had been constructed for a few hundred pounds. Despite government insistence that the war in Iraq – discussed below – had not made Britain more of a terrorist target, the Home Office investigation asserted that part of the four terrorists’ motivation was British foreign policy.

They had picked up the information they needed for the attack from the internet. It was a particularly ghastly one, because of the terrifying and bloody conditions below the streets of London in tube tunnels and it vividly reminded the country that it was as much a target as the United States or Spain. Indeed the intimate relationship between Britain and Pakistan, with

constant and heavy traffic between them, provoked fears that the British would prove uniquely vulnerable. Blair heard of the attack at the most poignant time, just following London's great success in winning the bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. He rushed back from Gleneagles in Scotland, where the G8 summit was discussing the ambitious new aid plan for Africa, and differences between the United States and the rest over global warming.

The London bombings are unlikely to have been stopped by more CCTV coverage, for there was plenty of that, nor by ID cards, for the killers were British citizens, nor by 'follow the money' anti-terror legislation, for little money was involved. Only even better intelligence might have helped. The Security Service as well as the Secret Intelligence Service (MI5 and MI6 as they are still more familiarly known) were already in receipt of huge increases in their budgets as they struggled to track down other murderous cells. Richard Reid, the 'shoe bomber' from Bromley who tried to destroy a flight from Paris to Miami in 2001, was another example of the threat from home-grown extremists, visiting 'radical' mosques from Brixton to Yorkshire, and there were many more examples of plots uncovered in these years, though by no means every suspect finally made it to court. In August 2005 police arrested suspects in Birmingham, High Wycombe and Walthamstow, east London, believing there was a plan to blow up as many as ten passenger aircraft over the Atlantic. The threat was all too real, widespread and hard to grip.

After many years of allowing dissident clerics and activists from the Middle East asylum in London, Britain had more than its share of inflammatory and dangerous extremists, who admired al Qaeda and preached violent jihad. Once September 11 had changed the climate, new laws were introduced to allow the detention without trial of foreigners suspected of being involved in supporting or fomenting terrorism. They could not be deported because human rights legislation forbade sending back anyone to countries where they might face torture. Seventeen were picked up and kept at Belmarsh high security prison. But in December 2004 the House of Lords ruled that these detentions were discriminatory and disproportionate and therefore illegal. Five weeks later the Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, hit back with 'control orders' to limit the movement of men he could not prosecute or deport. They would also be used against home-grown terror suspects. A month later, in February 2005, sixty Labour MPs revolted against these powers too, and the government only narrowly survived the vote. Ten Belmarsh men were put under these new restraints but the battle was

far from over. In April 2006 a judge ruled that such control orders were ‘an affront to justice’ because they gave the Home Secretary, a politician, too much power and two months later said curfews of eighteen hours a day on six Iraqis were ‘a deprivation of liberty’ and also illegal. The new Home Secretary, John Reid, lost his appeal and reluctantly had to loosen the orders. In other cases, meanwhile, two men under control orders vanished.

New Labour Britain found itself in a struggle between its old laws and liberties and a new borderless, dangerous world. As we have seen the Britain of the forties was a prying and regulation-heavy country, emerging from the extraordinary conditions of a fight for national survival. From the fifties to the end of the eighties, the Cold War had grown a shadowy security state, with the vetting of BBC employees, MI5 surveillance of political radicals, a secret network of bunkers and tunnels, and the suspension of British jurisdiction over those small parts of the country taken by the United States forces. Yet none of this seriously challenged hallowed principles such as habeas corpus, free speech, a presumption of innocence, asylum, the right of British citizens to travel freely in their country without identifying papers, and the sanctity of homes in which the law-abiding lived. In the ‘war on terror’ much of this was suddenly in jeopardy.

New forms of eavesdropping, new compulsions, new political powers seemed to the government the least they needed to deal with a new, sinuous threat which ministers said could last for another thirty years. They were sure that most British people agreed, and that the judiciary, media, campaigners and elected politicians who protested were a hand-wringingly liberal, too-fastidious minority. Tony Blair, John Reid and Jack Straw were particularly emphatic about this and on the numbers were probably right. As Gordon Brown eyed the premiership, his rhetoric was similarly tough. Against recent historical tradition it was left to the Conservatives, as well as the Liberal Democrats, to mount the barriers in defence of civil liberties.

The Waning

This book is written under the shadow of a new politics of global warming, when the British were being urged to be environmentally friendly. This author’s contribution, which

may save a Nordic wood or small grove of some beauty, is to resist giving a detailed account of the decade-long feud between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. It would, apart from anything else, require at least another volume the same size as this one. But it cannot be ignored because it has affected the country itself. The feud went on from New Labour's first days in power until the last months when the Prime Minister's fingertips, white with effort, were slipping from office. Sometimes there were oases of tranquillity and good humour, for months at a time. Yet the stories of door-slamming tantrums, four-lettered exchanges, make-ups, go-betweens, public snubs and cherished policies for Britain's future being tugged back and forth like disintegrating soft toys, were repeated in Whitehall private offices, pubs and newspaper columns almost weekly. Occasionally it seemed as if Blair was on the point of sacking his Chancellor. Brown was variously reported by Number Ten to have psychological flaws, to be a control-freak, a wrecker, a traditionalist 'playing to the gallery' and disloyal whenever the Prime Minister was in real trouble. Blair, retorted the Brownites, was a vain second-rater obsessed with money and glamour, who had betrayed the Chancellor over their original deal.

In the first term, Brown was defending his huge remit as Chancellor and Blair was trying to come to terms with how brutally he was being kept out of large policy areas; how little he knew of forthcoming Budgets; and how weak was his ability to push Britain towards the euro. Brown felt the second election victory in 2001 was mostly his own work, based on the strong economy. In the second term that followed it, he began pushing for a date when Blair would leave office. Blair, turning to the 'war on terror' and Iraq, failed to concentrate enough on domestic policy. Even so, he became ever more determined to hang on until he got the reforms he wanted. A gap seemed to open between Blair's enthusiasm for market-mimicking ideas to reform health and schools, and Brown's, for delivering better lives to the working poor. As we have seen, Brown was also keen on bringing private capital into public services, but there was a difference in emphasis which both men played up. 'Best when we are at our boldest,' said Blair. 'Best when we are Labour,' retorted Brown. Over Iraq, foundation hospitals and student top-up fees, Blair thought Brown came close to leaving him at the mercy of lethal backbench revolts, disappearing off into the rhododendron bushes just when he was most needed. Brown did give his support, and rally 'his people' to help Blair out

of various self-excavated holes, but the Scotsman with the ladder tended to arrive as darkness was falling.

After six years in office he felt Blair was squandering the party's reputation on gimmicks and a too enthusiastic backing for Bush. He thought Blair had lied to him about when he would step down. John Prescott intervened first during November 2003, so worried that their feud would bring down the government that he knocked their heads together – metaphorically, despite his reputation – over a dinner of shepherd's pie, telling them they would destroy the Labour Party. This produced a truce but during 2004 things worsened rapidly again. Labour was badly hurt in local elections. With Iraq still smouldering, Labour MPs began to panic about what would happen at the next election. A mix of personal and political frustration brought Blair to another low ebb. For years he and Brown had dealt with each other through a range of intermediaries meeting on neutral ground and carrying white flags. Punctuating these regular arm's-length contacts, at roughly the chilly level one might expect between a Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, Blair and Brown had hotter private meetings. But by now they were barely speaking and Blair was deeply depressed about his legacy, as well as private troubles.

In July 2004 four cabinet ministers were so worried he was about to resign that they jointly pleaded with him to stay on. In the autumn Prescott was involved in further talks about whether there could be a 'peaceful transition'. On one occasion he met Brown at an oyster bar by Loch Fyne in Scotland. All the tables were taken. So for an hour and a half the two men talked in a black government limousine in the carpark, surrounded by armed guards, as if they were two businessmen of Sicilian extraction planning the carve-up of criminal territories. Prescott later talked of the (tectonic) plates moving and admitted that ministers were positioning themselves for the end of the Blair years. Brown was preparing himself for his looming premiership, briefing himself on foreign affairs, reaching out to groups well outside the Treasury's normal remit. Transition teams were prepared. Surely, finally, even this soap-opera was ending?

It was not. Blair gathered together his formidable internal resources and quietly determined that he would not go after all. Immediately after Labour's conference at Brighton he returned to Downing Street to make a triple announcement. He confirmed he was buying a

house (an expensive, ugly, hard-to-let house) in Connaught Square which he and Cherie would eventually use for their retirement. After a heart scare the previous year, he was going into hospital for treatment using a thin wire to correct irregular heartbeat problems. This condition, which Blair was at pains to downplay, was known only to a few close friends. Like the house purchase, it tended to focus attention on his political mortality. Hence the third announcement, a bolt from the blue. He intended to fight the forthcoming election and if elected serve a full term. But as he told the author: 'I do not want to serve a fourth term – I do not think the British people would want a Prime Minister to serve so long – but I think it's sensible to make plain my intention now.' It was an unprecedented thing to say, and caught Brown on the hop – he was on his way to a meeting in Washington. In the short term it effectively killed off speculation that Blair was about to resign. To that extent it was clever. It may also have helped Labour in the 2005 election since Blair was promising his critics he would not, like Margaret Thatcher, try to 'go on and on'.

It certainly felt like a slap in the face for Brown. Just a day earlier in Brighton the two of them had had a long, tense talk about the future in which Blair warned him that his supporters were destabilizing the government and urged him to work with him. In response to a newspaper report that he was intending to serve a full third term, Blair told Brown this was wrong. He said nothing about his heart problem. When he discovered that Blair was planning a complete third term Brown was reported to be livid. Demoted from his old role running the forthcoming election campaign, he rejected an offer to chair Labour's press conferences during it. 'There is nothing that you could ever say to me now that I could ever believe,' he was said to have told the Prime Minister. But life is full of surprises. Blair discovered that pre-announcing his political mortality, however protracted, was a draining and sapping mistake, the worst purely tactical decision of his premiership. It provoked a stream of further questions – yes, but when exactly? How many years is a full term? How long does your successor get in office before a further election? If you are going, what validity do your long-term plans for the country really have? And mostpertinently, do you still want Gordon Brown to take over? These questions pursued him, loud, irritating, distracting heckles. His authority was first subtly, then dramatically, weakened.