

*Blair, Brown and Britishness : the end of an old song ?*

Keith Dixon, TRIANGLE/Université Lumière Lyon 2

Much has been made in recent months, in both the hagiographic and the academic literature about the differences between the two New Labour leaders, Gordon Brown and Anthony Blair. Indeed the warring camps within New Labour's institutional heartlands have done a great deal to comfort this view. Speaking privately for public consumption (a New Labour speciality) notable Blairites will present Brown as unreconstructed Old Labour, still clinging to the outmoded beliefs of a dying tribe (this, of course, is also how the Conservatives see him, or at least would like to see him for electoral propaganda purposes). Blair, on the other hand, is seen in public-private Brownite discourse as a right-wing cuckoo in the nest of Labour without any real political or intellectual allegiance to the Labour tradition, all show and no substance, lingering after a role in history as great statesman and even greater reformer - a historical legacy much undermined by what is now increasingly described (as Blair fades from vision and power) as the Irak fiasco.

This is all of course just spin, wilful misrepresentation of political reality. In most serious senses of the term, Gordon Brown is a Blairite, and much that is considered at home or abroad as being the distinguishing features of Blairism (what I have described elsewhere as second-generation neo-liberalism) is more directly due to Brown than to Blair. Brown has effectively had very much of a free hand in domestic economic and financial policy-making since 1997 : he was responsible for handing back to the Bank of England the key role in determining interest rates in 1997 (thus effectively abandoning Keynesian demand-management although it is now spun as a principled reduction of executive power) ; he has been the most fervent advocate of Public-Private Partnerships, *id est* the creeping privatization of what is left of Britain's public sector of health and education and a key element in New Labour's almost religious attachment to avoiding any repercussions of public spending on the tax structure; the vocabulary of "rights accompanied by responsibilities" which has been so successfully mobilized against the underlying philosophy of Britain's post-war welfare settlement comes as second nature in Brown's born-again Presbyterian vision of social policy, and has enabled Brown to align himself solidly behind the moral authoritarian stand taken by his predecessor concerning the forced entry on to the labour market of recalcitrant youth; labour market flexibility (or casualization) has become so much of an article of economic faith for Brown

that he would like to export this dynamic model to the rest of Old Europe. Even in foreign policy, over which Brown has had no power (if we except his constant preoccupation with keeping Britain *out* of the Euro zone) one would have had to have one's ear very close to the ground to hear even the hint of a murmur of protest against Blair's belligerent crusade in favour of "our values" which has taken him, or rather taken the "poor bloody squaddies" (to quote the great Scottish folklorist and poet, Hamish Henderson) into Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Irak. Thus despite protests from the Brownite camp to the opposite, even on this the most unpopular aspect of Blairite policy – especially among Labour supporters- Brown's public record on the issue of belligerent/humanitarian interventionism has been impeccably Blairite.

So will Brown's way just be Blairism with a Scottish accent, or Blairism with a frowning face, if you prefer? I think not, or not completely. And the topic of our conference this weekend perhaps gives us the key to Brown's significantly different positioning in current debates; a positioning which has little to do with the spin mentioned earlier. Despite the obvious similarities between the Blair and Brown projects, both solidly entrenched within the process of global neoliberalization, naturalized in the discourse of both camps as a "fact" - to borrow Bill Clinton's expression - rather than analyzed as a set of policies, *there are differences* of approach and the question of British identity seems to me to be particularly revealing from this standpoint.

Blair like Brown has had to deal with the British identity crisis which has been emerging ever more clearly over the last forty years or so, and whose evolution can be traced not only in the election results of the nationalist parties of the periphery but also in the increasingly trenchant cultural nationalism of the historical nations of Great Britain . Blair, like Brown, has opted for a strategy of reform (devolution), as opposed to Thatcherite glaciation, in the hope of cutting the grass from under the feet of the separatists and laying to rest (to borrow a phrase from Peter Mandelson) the nationalist threat, especially in Scotland. That strategy - it is now quite clear - has misfired most terribly : not only has the nationalist threat not been laid to rest in Scotland, but today the nationalists are in power (albeit with a minority government) and pushing through social democratic policies which can only be music to the ears of old Labour supporters, of whom there are still many North of the Tweed (a "bunch of unreconstructed wankers" is how Blair is said to have described his Scottish comrades in one recent visit to his homeland). Worse still, the threat of nationalism in Wales (which had always been the poor

cousin of peripheral nationalism) has grown beyond all expectation (probably even including the wildest dreams of Plaid Cymru members) and the nationalists are henceforth in a position to start making the sorts of demands that their Scottish counterparts have been making over the last quarter-century. The lingering threat of separation from in the North and West has now been compounded by new expressions of less than enthusiastic endorsement of Britishness in the heartlands of the British state itself. Thus a growing number of Conservative MPs, annoyed by the concessions granted to the Scots and the Welsh (not to mention the Northern Irish) and realistically accepting that (traditional Tory) Conservatism has become a lost cause on the British periphery, are now demanding English votes on English matters in the London parliament. And the bombing of the London underground, coming in the wake of riots in the former textile towns of Northern England come as a reminder that some are more integrated than others in what Gordon Brown describes as our “inclusive” political culture. So the identity question has come back with a vengeance into British politics and New Labour is being forced to hone its vision of Britishness in order to hold back the tidal waves of small-nation nationalism, and communitarian separatism. It is Brown’s ambition to play a key role in that intellectual honing of a new British sense of belonging.

*Blair’s vision* of British identity, if we can use that notion much abused in Blairite discourse, is like so much else in the Blairite ideological arsenal : smart and slick, full of the sorts of gimmicks that keep the marketing men and women in business and close to the hub of power. We have had Cool Britannia of the early years – that notion of rock n’roll Britain with Sting and Richard Branson as national icons – as well as the promotion of the more traditional British bulldog (finally, when one thinks about it , an apposite metaphor for the new Britain and its canine aggressiveness on the world scene, although perhaps the British pitbull terrier would have been closer to the reality of recent British gunboat diplomacy). We have had Britain as a young country (the title of Blair’s first book, you will remember). We still have Britain as modernity. This is now all very familiar but not much more impressive, in intellectual terms, than the identitarian advertising campaigns for Scotland’s national soft-drink, Irn Bru.

Despite the constitutional reforms – which *were* important though they can be seen as reactive rather than proactive- there was little serious thinking in Blairite circles about the break-up of Britain and Britishness. Blair’s intellectual mentors have little of substance to say about the

subject (although they may have much to say about almost everything else). Giddens seems to see what he describes as “local nationalisms” as little more than an irritation in the mostly positive process of globalization, a last-ditch attempt to stand against the forces of detraditionalizing market modernity. Robert Cooper, who has given some intellectual muscle to Blair’s foreign policy vision, has little time for small-nation nationalism, of the Scottish or Welsh (or indeed Irish) variety. Cooper’s hardline vision of keeping one’s end up in the globalized world sees only the big battalions, modernly defending their national interests and doing war when necessary in pursuit of those interests (the USA) or post-modernly sharing sovereignty (mainly because their military weakness affords them little other choice) as in the present-day European Union. Alongside this virtual vacuum in thinking about identity one finds a constant stream of well-meaning Blairite pronouncements about British internationalism (of course, definitely not of the *proletarian* variety) : a sort of hollow cosmopolitanism which has to do with French food and Italian clothes and New Age experiences in exotic settings. It also has to do with minding other people’s business when - through terrorism or trade barriers - their business interferes with our own (this was the very precise sense of the term internationalism as coined by Blair in his key speech in Chicago in April 1999 on the “international community”). Thus this new internationalism and its cosmopolitan window-dressing does not exclude waging war on the otherwise much-celebrated Other, when his/her otherness begins to get out of control.

This, I would argue, is not necessarily the Brownite way.

Although I would not wholeheartedly subscribe to the presently much-touted vision of Gordon Brown as philosopher king (“A intellectual in power” sighed admiringly the FT and New Labour journalist John Lloyd in the July 2007 issue of *Prospect*) there is more substance to Brown’s conception of Britishness than to that aired by his immediate predecessor. And Brown, unlike Blair, does know something about British history (not to mention the history of the British Labour movement of which he has specialist knowledge). Indeed in a spate of recent speeches on the issue of Britishness (some of which have been republished in Brown’s book, *Moving Britain Forward*) Brown taps into a rich array of historical sources to bolster his claim that the historical values that hold us all together under the inclusive banner of the Union Jack are *liberty*, *responsibility* and *fairness*. He has evidently read those he quotes, from Linda Colley to Tom Nairn (although his passing allusion to the latter is pretty close to a misquotation) and he spreads his net surprisingly wide in his quest to bring intellectual

authority to his views. Indeed his book is an intriguing example of the recurrent use of arguments of authority, down to its very structure, in which Brown's own thoughts are interspersed with introductions by the great and the good (Linda Colley on history of the notion of liberty in the Anglo-Saxon world or Nelson Mandela on world poverty, etc.) and for the time-pressed reader there are even synopses of each speech/chapter obviously written by some subordinate scribe from the Exchequer, who describes the author as "the Chancellor" and misses no occasion to pour praise on his boss's vision of a radiant British future (an aspect of Brown's recent rhetoric – verbal inflation in its most laxative incarnation – which is the perhaps unfortunate legacy of his predecessor at number 10).

Brown does indeed spread his net wide. He does appeal to the patriotic tradition of the British left. Thus, George Orwell gets several mentions in Brown's speeches and writings for his defence of British "decency" (one does feel that Brown should read what Orwell has to say in private correspondence about the Scots, or indeed the Indians – this might dampen a little his enthusiasm for the Orwell's vision of Britishness) and when Brown addresses the Fabian society he does try at least to tie up his patriotic vision with the traditions of Labour. Britishness is however too important, from Brown's point of view to be left to the Left (or what is left of the Left). One is nonetheless surprised to see Edmund Burke's "little platoons" – a British speciality apparently - being given pride of place (against the monolithic, bureaucratic (whatever) state, that Labour used to believe could be put to good use in righting the wrongs of capitalism) or to hear Brown congratulating Roger Scruton and Margaret Thatcher (yes, Margaret Thatcher) for their valiant defense of the British way.

Of course, like most patriotic discourse, Brown's vision of Britain's past and present has to turn a blind eye to what we might like to describe as the down side of our history, where the values presented as intrinsically ours are perhaps not terribly salient. It is difficult to square our historical defense of *liberty* (individual or collective), with the day-to-day practice of British imperialism, and it has taken us some time to recognize our *responsibility* in the needless massacre of whole villages in Kenya in the battle against the Mau-Mau movement in the 1950s. As for *fairness*, the examples are embarrassingly numerous of where the British have been less than fair with each other (our treatment of the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, or of the poor among us over the centuries, and indeed until the present time, immediately come to mind). Our transactions with near or distant neighbours have not always borne the mark of even-handedness : the Opium wars were not exactly an

exemplar of fair and ethical trading... As Ernest Renan pointed out more than a century ago, nationalism in order to exist usually has to abandon any clear sense of historical reality. This is an argument of course that has been mobilized quite regularly by anti-nationalist historians against their nationalist colleagues (I'm thinking here of Eric Hobsbawm's specific rejection of Scottish nationalist historiography). But Hobsbawm and others do have a strong point. Myth is much handier for the apprentice patriot, whatever particular country his/her patriotism may be addressing. And emphatic national myth-making is what the new Prime Minister is essentially indulging in when he invokes the Union Jack, for example, as a symbol of tolerance and inclusiveness and our imperial history, *bon an mal an*, as something to be proud of. Both Tom Nairn and Chris Harvie in recent writing have pointed to this weakness in Brown's presentation, Nairn even suggesting that part of the explanation for Brown's emphatic British patriotism may well be, consciously or not, a form of compensation for the fact that he does come from the periphery himself, and in many English eyes is therefore not altogether one of us. The compensation thesis can be verified in Brown's recurrent selection of the "great moments" in the construction of Britishness and the British way : like Margaret Thatcher before him, but perhaps with less excuse (he was trained as a historian) Brown conflates English and British history and traces our peculiarly British love of freedom, for instance back to Runnymede and the Glorious Revolution – which unfortunately of course took place before Britain.

Because Brown comes from the periphery, and, unlike Blair, spent his politically formative years in a Scotland of the 1970s that was beginning to establish what Chris Harvie has called its intellectual UDI, he is more keenly aware of the difficulties that lie ahead for British unionism. He must have – from personal experience - a painful understanding of the centrifugal (in British terms) forces that have been so dynamic in Scottish political and cultural life over the last thirty years, and which have been winning most of the arguments (how many Scottish writers, indeed of Scottish intellectuals more generally, today would define themselves as unionist?). Reactivating one strand of thinking in the Scottish and British labour tradition he knows so well – the unionism that used to serve as the spontaneous ideology of the British social-democratic state – Brown believes he can turn the tide against those who have moved on from Britishness. Brown is well aware that within the ranks of Labour, or what is left of them after the New Labour purge, many still cling to the belief that Britain is better, in terms of the delivery of social justice than Scotland (or Wales). Those in the labour movement who saw the nationalists as Tories dressed in tartan in the 1970s and

1980s can still be won to a vision of progressive Britishness, or so Brown hopes. His major handicap, of course, is that those so-called tartan Tories in the SNP are now more left wing, in political rhetoric but also now in government practice, than their Labour adversaries, and that there is a growing perception that if anybody has taken to Tory cross-dressing, it may well be the leadership of British Labour since 1994 (the vestimentary consequence of triangulation, so to speak).

I believe, however, that there is more to the Brownite vision of Britain and Britishness than a revamped Labour unionism, strong as that current may be within Brown's thinking. His rewriting of Britain's past and his rehabilitation of Britain's Empire may not contradict the dominant strand of traditional Labour thinking on these issues (Labour was at best lukewarm in its denunciation of imperialism and when in power could be as brutal as the Conservative party in the defence of British imperial interests) but cannot be explained solely in these terms. Brown is a Presbyterian, a son of the Manse, and closer to his Calvinist roots today (according to his most sympathetic biographer) than in his youth. We would do well, from this point of view, to remember that Scottish Presbyterianism was a key actor in Britain's imperial adventures, as Niall Ferguson has reminded us in his recent work, and there is more than a trace of pride in the specifically Presbyterian contribution to imperial Britishness in Brown's thinking (in his praise of what he calls the British virtue of "public service" for instance).

Brown's defence of Britishness, which Anthony Giddens sees as central to his strategy for maintaining power and conserving the "reformist" thrust of New Labour, draws therefore on sources which are both close to his own heart and training (Labour and Presbyterian Britishness) but also from further afield, in the tradition of radical Conservatism for which Brown is a more recent fellow traveller (in his kind allusions to Margaret Thatcher, for instance, which are at a far remove from his denunciatory prose in the book he wrote on Thatcherism in 1989 entitled "Where there's greed..." which it would be too embarrassing here to quote). His new patriotism is presented as an antidote to the "self-hatred" which Brown and many other members of the New Labour elite perceive in political and intellectual analyses (especially of the Left) which are critical of Britain's present and past. It fits well with a new ideological climate in Britain, or at least in its populous Southern lowlands, which has rehabilitated Empire in recent times and the sense of Britishness that went with it, and has tried to give an new and more positive gloss to the tarnished history of Britain in its relations

with the rest of the world. Niall Ferguson, among others, has been highly active on this front, singing the praises of an imperfect but defensible Imperial endeavour, with remarkably little resistance from the community of academic historians. This selective rewriting of Britain's past (and therefore implicit justification of Britain's participation in contemporary imperial ventures) enables Brown to project into a future which – he hopes - might well live up to our XVIIIth and XIXth century expectations. The future lies not necessarily in the East, as some have claimed with the rising star of neoliberalized China : Brown has suggested in one of his most recent pronouncements that the 21<sup>st</sup> century could well be British

The question that remains is will this work? Will Brown's rehabilitation of the "British way", and his praise of all things British capture the imagination of the British people (or the British elite) in the way that the rewriting/re-imagining of Ireland at the turn of the XXth century and of Scotland and Scottishness in the 1970s and 1980s, gave a new vigour to modern small nation patriotisms on the British periphery?. For consciously or not, this is surely what Brown is trying to do, in conditions that are however altogether less favourable to his patriotic enterprise. Following in the footsteps of writers of whom he can only disapprove, like Tom Nairn or Alasdair Gray who did so much to recreate a new sense of themselves among the Scots under the Thatcher regime, Brown would like to do the same for his country of adoption, his imagined community of Ukania.

There are some reasons for believing that the Brownite venture into identity politics may be successful. His insistence on the liberal, tolerant, inclusive face of Britishness (no matter how unfounded this may be in historical reality) and on the myth of British fairplay is an altogether more attractive answer to Britain's identity anxieties than the xenophobic outpourings of the UKIP and the Powellite tradition of exclusive tribal Britishness. The undoubted sense of insecurity created by the post-September the 11<sup>th</sup> situation and insurgent Islamism in Britain itself as a consequence of the Iraq war, might be one of the explanations for the growth in the numbers of those who see Britishness as important, as recorded in recent opinion polls to which Brown makes ample reference. It may be also be that the continuing pressure from the Scots and Welsh periphery for ever greater autonomy from the English centre will lead to an upsurge of Anglo-British identitarianism

However, there are also sound arguments suggesting that, as Tom Nairn has claimed, there is something Canute-like about New Labour's attempt to save Britain. The historical tide has



turned, so to speak, and it does seem unlikely that those who have moved on (or back, if you prefer) to small nation national-identity, and have abandoned the dual patriotism that made the British multi-national state politically viable, will see any reason to return to Britishness. Unlike its Scots and Welsh counterparts in contemporary British politics, British identity has no dominant Other to mobilize against, no sense of grievance against a governing centre to hold it together. There may still be a space for Britishness in *England*, abandoned by its ungrateful brothers and sisters in the North and West, but current trends seem to suggest that Scotland and Wales are moving on. Thus the attempt to rehabilitate Britishness runs the risk of simply giving another more respectable name to a resurgent Englishness.

“What a curse to the earth are small nations” wrote the Scottish revolutionary writer of the 1930s, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, in response to the rise of cultural nationalism in Ireland and in his home country of Scotland. Although Grassie Gibbon’s alternative – socialist internationalism – is no longer the Brownite cup of tea, one can imagine that such must be a sentiment shared by the present occupant of number 10 Downing Street in his uphill struggle against the breakup of Britishness.