

ALAS POOR GORDON, I KNEW HIM WELL



The vultures are circling over Downing Street. Labour's defeat in the Glasgow East by-election was a disaster. This was supposed to be Labour's third safest seat in Scotland and our 25th safest in the whole of Britain. Such 'meltdown' figures would not of course be replicated in a General Election. But crushing defeat now stares the Party in the face. It is the biggest crisis in the Labour Party for a generation, and it is a crisis of governance and vision as much as of personal leadership. The great tragedy for the Party is that most of the vultures circling around Gordon Brown would only perpetuate the crisis.

For months now, a group of ex-Ministers have been cruising the corridors and cafeteria of Parliament in search of stray Labour MPs to descend on. "Carruthers, dear boy/girl, we haven't spoken for ages,

but have you got a moment? What are we going to do about Gordon? He is leading the Party into disaster. I know you don't want to lose your seat at the election, but what do we do?"

If we were children, the process would be called 'grooming'. It has little to do with the well-being of the MP or the Party. Most of the approaches are coming from the remnants of the Blair Witch-Way Project, looking for a way back to power. Their interests are more in shafting the Labour Party than in saving it.

For a couple of years now a group of 20 or so ex-Ministers (mostly junior ones) have been meeting to discuss how they could maintain the flame of the Blairite revolution. Not content to see that it lives on under Gordon Brown, discarded ambitions within the Dead Ministers Society pump out delusions that only a greater lurch to the Right can save Labour: accelerate privatisation, bring more private capital into public services, equivalents of Bush's Project for a New American Century.

Meanwhile, back in Gordon's bunker, the messages about 'listening' and 'learning' from each by-election defeat increasingly sound like the word 'help'. Sadly, Gordon does not appear able to reach out from the legacy of his own past. All the pronouncements are merely assertions that the policies that took us into this mess will ultimately get us out of it. You wish.

It isn't credible to claim that Labour's woes are all caused by the world outside. The economics and politics of our current impoverishment were constructed by the Blair/Brown leadership. An obsession with off-balance-sheet accounting made public investment dependant on private finance. Private finance demanded deregulation of financial markets. Banks were turned into casinos in the helter-skelter creation of credit. The 'safety net' was supposed to be found in an ever rising spiral of property values. Such delusions chased themselves into absurdities...and then into tears. It was where New Labour was always going to take us.

Domestically, the equivalent part of the process was in the neutering of government. Politics itself was

outsourced. Ministers were in office, but not in power. Those promoted into office loved it, for they brought with them an ambition that was politics-free. They argued for the transfer of responsibility from parliament to an array of Regulators, arms-length providers and private contractors, because it protected Ministers from criticism. The lightest touch of regulatory frameworks left parliament and government in a Pontius Pilate position. If anything went wrong it was “nothing to do with me, Guv”. But when it does go wrong government, quite rightly, cops the blame.

So it is that we end up in a summer of self-inflicted humiliation. The fiasco of pupil assessments (SATs), before children move on from primary to secondary school, illustrates the impoverishment of government. One inspired cartoon had a child sitting over an assessment paper and being asked if she was completing her SATs paper. Her reply was “No I am marking them”.

The absurdity is not in the complete mess that ETS has made of the schools marking project. It is why they were ever given it in the first place. When teachers and schools did their own internal assessments there was never this shambles. When local education authorities had the oversight responsibility, deadlines were never missed and papers were not found, un-marked, in warehouses at the other side of the country.

The old approach had a direct line of political and professional accountability. The standing of teachers was enhanced and no-one would ever have dreamt of a clause in the contract that prevents ETS from being sued or penalised for their cock-ups. And Ministers would have had direct political responsibility for making sure that the system worked.

The same logic applies to the wave of local Post Office closures. Even though the Post Office is a publicly owned company, with a ‘universal public service obligation,’ Ministers declare themselves powerless to intervene in its running.

As energy companies cash in on the windfall profits of oil price rises and also hump 60% price increases on the public, Ministers shrink from ‘interfering in the market’. No matter that it is pushing households in fuel poverty up from 4.5 million to 6 million. Government insists that market rules are set by the regulator, and that the regulator should have no responsibility for fuel poverty. The emasculation of parliament and government has nothing to do with the big bad world ‘out there’. It is the construct upon which New Labour built itself. No amount of musical chairs at the top will put this right if we don’t change the policies at the bottom. Doing so is not complicated, but it does require courage.

The next couple of years will be a global financial nightmare. The emphasis should be to repatriate capital wherever possible and to revisit the Roosevelt/Keynes doctrines in the form of a Green New Deal

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Stuff the notion of Gordon’s rules. In a recession the government must borrow and spend. Trade Union pension funds, looking for a shelter that will not wipe them out, should be re-directed into public bonds to fund public works. Today’s political priorities would have to be found in the ecological infrastructure that will survive the 21st century, climate change and peak oil. None of this is beyond our reach, but none of it is compatible with the New Labour obsession with deregulated, neo-liberal economics. The problem is that this is the world-view that Gordon and Tony created for themselves. It was supported to

be their sanctuary, and their guarantee of greatness. Now it is the millstone that will sink them and anyone else tied to it.

Gordon could cut the ties before any of his 'friends' cut his throat. The trouble is that neither he nor the encircling would-be wannabes have the courage or vision to do so. The choice may thus be between a Greek or a Shakespearean tragedy.

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