

LAST DAYS



In the last days of Portuguese colonial occupation of Mozambique the retreating army left a number of legacies that the country would remember them for. They poured concrete down the lift shafts of tall apartment blocks and did the same to wells and drains. Twenty years later, some of these abandoned and derelict landmarks remained as testimony to the brutality and ruthlessness of the era of occupation.

These are New Labour's legacy days. And in the months that remain, Tony Blair is pouring as much concrete as he can into the lift shafts, wells and drainage systems that Labour will inherit. This should come as no surprise. The only bizarre element is in watching Gordon Brown help him do it. The Portuguese had more sense.

From the outset, the New Labour plan was to turn Britain into a mini-America and our political system into a privatised and commercialised one, dominated by two parties of capitalism. This is essentially what the Hayden Phillips report on party funding is designed to do.

Those who say that Phillips has no understanding of Labour's origins and traditional links within the Labour movement, miss the point. Philips has no interest in Labour's trade union link...any more than Blair does.

The idea of setting a £50,000 cap on donations to political parties is designed specifically to hit at trade union funding of the Labour Party. Anyone vaguely familiar with how this works in the USA knows how easy it is for the rich to engineer donation laundering. Individual and corporate wealth finds it easy to percolate into the system, and ultimately to own it. The Tories may hate trade union funding of the Labour Party, but this is the only 'clean' money in the system. Unions have to ballot their members in order to have a political fund in the first place and then have a duty to disclose the full extent of their contributions. No similar constraints apply to those who corporately fund the Tories.

Rumour has it that Blair has already discussed the Phillips Report with David Cameron and secured Tory support for it. The Tories must be ecstatic. They are already sitting sweet, on bucket loads of donations, and can see the damage these changes could do to Labour. It would signal a huge leap in the direction of American style democracy and the dismantling of the Labour link.

For the moment there are huge rumblings amongst the ranks of Labour MP's. Rebellion runs across the lips of those who have never rebelled against anything. The question is 'will it last'?

The one thing you have to say about Blair is that his political judgement has been infallible when it comes to the Parliamentary Labour Party. He has always known that the PLP would endorse any old crap he came up with.

Even changes that depended on support from the Tories weren't a problem for him. As long as he could call on the votes of Labour loyalists who would vote for the slaughter of the first born if asked to, he was happy to allow the Tories to do the rest for him.

So it will be with Trident.

Blair wants Trident firmly in the lift shaft before he leaves the building. The White Paper proposing its renewal is thinner than economy brand toilet paper. There is no examination of alternative defence and security options; no question of why a decision has to be made now; no scope for a wider public debate than the three month timetable Blair has set.

The same combination of 'Last Days' loyalists and titillated Tories is expected to come out and deliver, for Blair, the £75 billion legacy that others will have to pay for. If it weren't so pitiful and misguided it would make great farce. Blair skips round all the serious arguments against Trident renewal, saying simply that it is a matter of judgement. He said the same about Iraq. But his delusions about Britain's role in the nuclear club are based on a fantasy world rather than a real one.

Even the Tories know Britain doesn't have an independent nuclear deterrent. Trident is a nuclear warhead with a 3 stage launch system. The launch system is owned, made and stored by the Americans at their Norfolk naval base in Virginia. Britain could not fire a Trident missile on its own because the entire GPS navigation system has to be fitted and operated by the US. Even firing a missile is controlled by a triple lock key system, with the US and NATO holding the other 2 keys. On its own, Britain barely has the power to throw the warhead overboard, let alone find an enemy for it to land on.

We're like the kid who's not trusted to walk the dog around the block, but who walks the empty lead around instead, growling to himself and pretending it might bite. I have never been convinced of either the moral or the military case for Trident, but those who do ought to be questioning whether £75 billion for an empty lead amounts to anything more than an expensive fantasy.

No less fantastic are the explanations Ministers are offering about the possible use of a new generation of Trident missiles. They cannot argue that our current possession of nuclear weapons has had any remote relevance in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sudan or anywhere else. Nor do Ministers claim that Trident has any role against the terrorist or the suicide bomber.

The latest Ministerial line is to say 'what if a war-mongering nation were to emerge in 20 years, armed with nuclear weapons? Where would we be then?' It is an argument I last heard decades ago in the Dr Strangelove surroundings of a war-game scenario at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

They asked you to imagine that a country rose up in the middle of the Atlantic, peopled by a war-mongering race known as the Phantasians. You then had a week to try to resolve the international tensions and conflict that surrounded you.

As it turned out, the exercise always ended up as Armageddon. This was partly because, by Friday, people got bored and were looking forward to leaving. They had lost interest in whether the world ended or not, just so long as they didn't miss the plane home.

Everyone dumped nuclear missiles on everyone else. Virtually everything that existed got wiped out, but we all agreed it had been a jolly good war and that those troublesome Phantasians wouldn't be getting up to their tricks again for a long, long time..."Taxi!"

We played these war games under the supervision of military generals who were desperate for us to believe that it was only their nuclear arsenal that stood between us and the Phantasians; between us and extinction. Even then, they were old men's arguments.

The wars, when they came, were of a different character. Today's attacks and insecurities are of a different order. The £75 billion should go into climate change abatement measures and the infrastructures of survival, North and South.

Blair's nuclear infatuation is like his attachment to George Bush; sadly out of touch, seriously destabilising and certain to end in tears. A sane political system would refuse to be bounced into such absurdities.

Ours, however, is patrolled by men (and women) trailing empty dog leads, and growling their way towards the government's 'Yes' lobbies. We are becoming our own Phantasians.