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From Blair to Brown: All Change?

New Leadership, New Priorities, New Policies

Stephanie Hofmann / Roderick Parkes

Analyses of the likely changes to British foreign and European policies that a government under Gordon Brown will herald have been highly speculative: Although Brown's style of government is well-documented, the substance of his plans in this area remains somewhat shrouded in mystery. Today, the defining characteristic of Brown's agenda in this area prioritises tackling 'global problems', such as poverty, over European policy and modes of international action. Yet, given the growing constraints on the exercise of prime-ministerial power in Britain, this air of mystery appears increasingly unimportant: The greatest source of continuity and change in policy may not be Brown but rather the resurgent domestic actors which have increased their clout in the dying days of the last Blair government and whose preferences are well-documented. Brown's capacity to realise his priorities depends in no little part upon his capacity to change his style of government and outmanoeuvre these resurgent actors.

As leader of the rebranded "New" Labour party in the 1990s, Tony Blair came to power on the back of an agenda that promised to curb and clarify the exercise of government power in society and the world. The party had committed itself to re-establishing, what it termed, the 'proper balance' between Parliament and the executive, thereby narrowing the considerable scope for the abuse of executive power apparent under John Major's outgoing Conservative government. In the same vein, the marginalisation of citizens in the political process and their perceived disenfranchisement in favour of central executive latitude were to be overcome, this time thanks to a greater openness towards the use of refer-

enda and the devolution of power to the constituent territories of the United Kingdom.

Yet, a decade later, and despite a raft of constitutional reforms, Blair's style of government and his effective accrual of power have earned him the epithet—none too flattering in Britain—of 'presidential'. He has gained in domestic power at the expense of his party, Westminster, and—despite his propensity to directly mobilise popular support—the citizen. Suspicion has even been directed at the Prime Minister's considerable role in foreign policy—a policy area traditionally dominated by the executive.

Against the background of a political

system in which the Prime Minister is very much seen as prime, it is no surprise that Blair's replacement by Gordon Brown is widely expected to herald important changes to the country's foreign and European policies.

The end of the line: Blair's foreign and European policy legacy

In the mid-1990s, New Labour began to formulate a foreign policy approach set up in express contradistinction to the Conservatives' perceived misuse of Britain's international power. This misuse was deemed to rest upon two elements: Firstly, an isolationist attitude, which meant that Britain failed to fully exploit (in particular, the European) channels of international action open to it; secondly, its brand of *Realpolitik*, which meant that when Britain did engage itself internationally it was in pursuit of narrow, short-sighted national goals.

- ▶ New Labour highlighted the ineffectuality of Britain's then position as the reactive 'awkward partner' amongst the EU-15. It instead stressed its European vocation, expressing a desire to lead in Europe. It also shifted the fixation upon the United States, and the 'special relationship', seeking to place Britain in a position of influence as a 'bridge' between the US and Europe. Finally, it laid emphasis upon multilateral channels of action. These tenets were seen as more than mere modes of exercising power, counting amongst Labour's core ideological commitments.
- ▶ In the context of the post-Cold-War international constellation, New Labour began to look beyond Britain's classic legal obligations to other states, asking whether the country did not also bear obligations to the individuals in them and how to improve the situation in multilateral settings. The tenets of 'liberal interventionism' that it subsequently developed stressed the obligation of pursuing these individuals' rights and interests in instances where

their own state was found wanting—if necessary through military means.

Yet there is currently a broad political consensus that Britain, during Blair's time in office, has failed to fully exploit the available international channels to extend its international clout, and that—where it has exercised influence—its citation of international obligations has been a blind for the pursuit of its own narrow interests. It is against this background that Brown will formulate his foreign and European policy priorities.

Off the rails:

Gordon Brown's uncharted foreign and European policy plans

Despite the fact that he has been at the forefront of British politics since his appointment as Shadow Chancellor in 1992, it is difficult to pin down Brown's express views on anything but a handful of foreign and European policy issues. All the same, it is possible to synthesise the policy positions widely *attributed* to Brown as well as those few concrete opinions that he himself has elaborated.

Foreign policy

We can identify two broad divergences from Blair:

- ▶ foreign policy under Blair presented the mode by which international action was pursued—EU channels, multilateralism, bilateralism with the US—as an ideological statement *per se*. Although he is known as a 'keen multilateralist' and 'instinctive atlanticist', Brown appears to perceive the institutions of international cooperation much more as tools for the realisation of more dearly held principles and ideological tenets (see below). This heralds a move away from Blair's all-but-abandoned aspirations to act as a bridge between the US and Europe and to place Britain at the heart of Europe, as well as signalling a move away from the maintenance of 'transatlantic solidarity'

for ideological reasons. It is to be reckoned that Britain will display a greater readiness to go it alone internationally, should other modes of international action not serve Brown's policy purposes.

- ▶ Brown's foreign policy approach shares Blair's interest in global problems that do not immediately affect Britain's narrow core interests, and where intervention for the benefit of individuals in a third country may require an ostensible degree of altruism. However, Brown's diagnosis of 'global problems' diverges quite significantly from Blair's: Blair's brand of liberal interventionism increasingly saw the cause of, and solution to, many global problems in, respectively, the absence and establishment of liberal democratic institutions abroad. For Brown, the causes and solutions are of an economic nature, and—just as in his domestic policy—his strong moral sense is closely intertwined with his economic agenda. This explains his focus on fighting the negative effects of globalisation, alleviating and erasing poverty, and education.

European policy

Brown's dissatisfaction with the European Union derives from his conviction that it is not functioning properly as a tool but is instead increasingly run by, and for the purposes of, its bureaucracy.

His wrath has been directed most famously at the EU-budget/Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) conundrum. He believes that if the EU partners are genuine in their desire to set up the EU as an effective cushion against the negative effects of globalisation, they should be directing funding towards training and research and away from protectionist mechanisms such as the CAP (which in turn have a negative impact on the development prospects of third states). Trade and regulatory policies have been the subject of similar critique. His opposition to the proposed Constitutional Treaty (TCE), meanwhile, derives

from the notion that it marks the outcome of a pompous and ideologically motivated project which fails in the important aim of reforming the EU's political apparatus as a workable tool in the wake of enlargement.

In these issue areas, then, commentators suggest that Brown is prepared to return the UK to its former position of awkward partner. However, this apparent return to form for Britain will be based less on the kind of principled euroscepticism that the leader of the Conservatives, David Cameron, might aspire to, or the sort of ideological euroscepticism that really drives much of the Tories' behaviour, but rather on a more practical scepticism about the utility of EU-based action. All the same, and on the reverse principle that the EU does indeed offer the appropriate channel for the required action, there remain a number of areas in which Brown appears likely to support further European integration. These include the Lisbon Agenda, as well as initiatives on energy security, the environment, international crime and terrorism, and perhaps even a European foreign and defence policy in the context of transatlantic security.

A signal change?

The domestic constraints on Prime Minister Brown

Despite the interest that the differences between him and Blair have generated, it is by no means obvious whether Brown will be in a position to effect any real changes to Britain's foreign and European policies. The broad scope that Blair enjoyed to pursue his priorities rested in no small part on his extraordinary capacity to garner popular support for his initiatives as well as on a happy set of circumstances—including a large parliamentary majority, no serious Tory competitors for the position of Prime Minister, and a Labour government in Scotland—that offset *de facto* the constraints on executive power resulting from New Labour's formal devolution of executive competencies. By contrast, Gordon Brown's

public support is not large, and the happy circumstances that sustained Blair's influence have largely fallen away.

For Brown, then, the constraints on his capacity to effect change will be very real. This, though, does not imply that there will be no change in Britain's foreign and European policies, merely that commentators risk misidentifying the source of that change: On many issues, the most important driver of change may not be Gordon Brown, but rather the group of resurgent domestic actors who have gained power towards the end of the last Blair government.

In the following, some significant effects on British policy arising from Brown's lack of popular support and the resurgence of long-marginalised political actors are considered.

The fat controller? Popular support and Brown's personal power

The pervasion of the media in British politics can bring with it a strengthening of the prime-ministerial role concomitant to the personalisation of government and the exercise of power. This tendency was particularly marked under Blair, who, through his media presence, was able to build popular support for pet projects, relegating Cabinet, Parliament, and party consent to a secondary position. Brown does not possess the skills to foster this kind of relationship with the media or public. If he is to maintain power, it appears likely that he will instead have to compromise on aspects of his overall political agenda, rendering them more palatable to the public, especially in the run-up to the next general election (in all likelihood, mid-2009).

Unusually, the pressure to 'populise' his agenda will focus primarily on aspects of foreign policy: Given the cross-party consensus between the Conservatives and New Labour on core issues of domestic policy, the two parties are now seeking *new* topics that distinguish them from one another. These will include Britain's response to the

related questions of globalisation, migration, the environment, and global security—issues with a strong foreign policy dimension.

Although this tendency will lend weight to those foreign policy issues which already sit at the centre of Brown's moral-economic agenda, it may prevent him from managing them in the way he would like: By populising his agenda he may disrupt his delicate, somewhat technocratic attempts at fostering economic co-development between Britain and developing states. Moreover, this move to use foreign policy issues as electoral themes could upset his broader attempts to 'normalise' foreign policy-making in the wake of the Iraq War and reassert it as an executive domain, a distant second to domestic issues in the public attention.

As for European policy, most commentators agree that it still only really becomes an issue of popular concern when it is linked to questions of more immediate interest to British domestic issues. This will likely occur in the question of EU Treaty reform/ TCE: Here, the principle issue has increasingly become not the desirability of the Constitutional Treaty but the more fundamental question of democratic participation in policy-making. As a parting shot, Blair distanced himself somewhat from earlier pronouncements, suggesting in April 2007 that no popular referendum would be needed if the TCE were to be replaced by an ordinary treaty. Yet Brown—elected *de facto* to the position of Prime Minister via Labour Party procedures alone and 'crowned' without any serious competition—will struggle to justify a further perceived disenfranchisement of the British public.

Flying Scotsman: devolution, identity politics and European policy

The devolution of power to Scotland has led to a politicisation of Brown's own Scottishness, with the Conservatives questioning the role of Scottish MPs in Westminster. In

order to secure popular support, and to convince the public that he is capable of pursuing policies in the *national* interest, Brown has recently stressed his Britishness. This new emphasis on nationalist-patriotic symbolism may carry through to his foreign and European policies, with Brown deciding to 'go it alone' internationally for domestic electoral reasons, rather than because this represents the mode of action most suited to the realisation of his substantial preferences.

Yet, the principal constraints arising from devolution are likely to be rather more concrete: Politicians and analysts alike have observed that the distinction between European and domestic policies is an increasingly artificial one. Hence, sub-national actors with domestic policy-making capabilities have to be taken into account when explaining a country's European and, albeit to a lesser degree, foreign policies. The UK is no exception.

Created by the Scottish Act (1998) as part of the devolution of power to the UK's constituent parts, the Scottish Parliament and Executive have gained competencies in core domestic policy areas. The recent elections to the Scottish Parliament (May 2007) returned the Scottish National Party (SNP) as the largest party, and a minority government entered power under the leadership of the nationalist Alex Salmond. The strong rise in the SNP's electoral share has clearly altered the balance of power in the Scottish Parliament to the disadvantage of the Labour Party, which dominated government throughout Blair's time in office.

The SNP has complained about the marginalisation of the Scottish Executive in the formulation of UK European policy. Its core concerns are likely to clash with those of Brown: The party has emphasised the benefits that Scotland enjoys under the current Structural Funds arrangements; Brown sets rather greater store by their reform. The SNP has also voiced concerns about the fate of the unique Scottish legal system in the EU's criminal justice cooperation; although he has similar concerns about the

British legal system, Brown's desire to further EU cooperation against transnational terrorism and criminality points to a source of tension.

No more railroading Parliament

Blair's treatment of Parliament was for a long time characterised by high-handedness and—despite the somewhat cosmetic involvement of Parliament in the decision to go to war in Iraq—foreign and European policies has been no exception: Until recently Blair enjoyed a commanding majority in Westminster, and was for a long time viewed by Labour MPs as one of the keys to their electoral success, affording him considerable leeway. The third Blair government has, however, seen the Labour majority shrivel.

Disaffected elements within the Labour Party have been vocal in their opposition to Blair's emphasis on foreign affairs, which has apparently come at the detriment of his handling of domestic issues. Although in principle it is to be welcomed, Blair's and Brown's increasing engagement in Africa, for example, is viewed as a mere diversion from the considerable disadvantages faced by Britain's poor.

Of late, parties of all political stripes have drawn particular attention to the marginalisation of Parliament in European policy-making, and specifically the so-called Third Pillar of the EU in which much home affairs cooperation occurs. They are pushing to make parliamentary scrutiny of this area more effective. Both Houses have been rather more reserved than the British executive about the desirability of European Justice and Home Affairs cooperation, and the Lords particularly concerned about the quality of human rights protection.

A change of track?

Brown's style of government

Brown's capacity to achieve his substantial priorities will depend in no little measure upon his style of government and his sub-

sequent capacity to assert himself *vis-à-vis* the various ranks of previously marginalised political actors. His desire to exercise a high degree of personal power is well-known, as is his unwillingness to compromise once his mind has been made up. Yet, his lack of popular support and the changed political constellation mean that it may be impossible for him to achieve even his core goals if he behaves in this manner. This throws Brown into a dilemma.

Already his strategy for reconciling this dilemma is becoming more concrete:

- ▶ Despite his well-documented communicational difficulties, Brown envisages engaging the public in reasoned debate about his policy principles in order to build popular support for his actions. But these high-minded aims have not been matched by any practical moves. Some openly wonder whether Brown understands that a precondition for constructive debate is the readiness of *both* protagonists to change their minds. In fact, outside a number of headline domestic constitutional issues in which public consultation may occur (albeit through committee), Brown appears likely to try to build popular support with gimmicks such as the choice of a 'young cabinet' with electoral appeal.
- ▶ Brown has exhibited a renewed concern for Parliament: By enshrining Parliament's right not only to approve war but also to declare armed action, his projected constitutional changes would build upon the precedent set in 2003 when Britain only formally joined the invasion of Iraq following a parliamentary vote. Yet, his detractors accuse him of seeking to placate Parliament and thereby to increase his scope in day-to-day foreign policy decision-taking, by offering MPs greater powers in exceptional situations. They also suggest that he is making a virtue out of a weakness: Within policy-making circles, and more broadly, there has been a strong counter-reaction to Blairite centralism; by bringing in a series of—potentially cosmetic—

reforms that promise a more consensual attitude towards policy-making within the Labour party and Whitehall, as well as with Westminster, Brown can mark a break with the past and perhaps even preserve his power in real terms.

- ▶ Despite a recent and rather public thawing, his relations with the new, broadly pro-European Scottish first minister have been far from constructive and consensual. Brown failed, for example, to take up contact with Salmond for some considerable time after the Scottish elections. He appears unlikely to extend to an SNP-dominated Executive consultative courtesies that were previously refused the Scottish Labour Party.

Thus, in spite of an ostensible willingness to compromise and delegate over certain issues, the strategy may seek in essence to preserve a centralist and unbending style of government. This appears myopic indeed, and, should it be the case, will likely see Brown become increasingly reactive to other actors in the medium term.

Avoiding a head-on collision: British-German relations

Brown's approach to foreign and European policies is thus likely to show two broad characteristics: *Firstly*, at the heart of his foreign policy will lie a complex moral-economic agenda, which has already encountered criticism for underestimating the political dimension of 'global problems' that Blair's policy so focussed upon. *Secondly*, he will take a broadly non-ideological approach in choosing the appropriate mode of international cooperation. Since he apparently views the EU as, in large part, a dysfunctional tool for the realisation either of domestic or foreign policy, this will effectively lead to a preponderance of foreign policy.

Yet, his scope for pursuing these priorities will be considerably restricted, especially if he does not learn to compromise and delegate over issues not of core im-

portance to his agenda. Not only are there 'external constraints' (Iraq, to name but one hangover from the Blair era), there are also domestic obstacles. The possible need to popularise his agenda will draw him away from a technocratic approach to the solving of problems and disrupt efforts to make pragmatic choices about the mode of international action necessary. Many of his priorities will likely come under fire from Westminster and Edinburgh.

What does all this mean for the current German administration's foreign and European policies? In an EU of 27 states, and perhaps even in the global environment, the apparent end of the political vacuum in France and Britain provides considerable opportunities for the EU-3 to exercise international influence. Yet, despite the positive overtones from his June 2006 meetings with Angela Merkel and Peer Steinbrück, the prospect of a Brown government is an unprepossessing one for Germany's 'grand coalition'.

Admittedly, the failure of Blair's efforts to effect a British-German rapprochement can be put down in no small part to the fact that the Blair-Schröder 'Third Way' proved too economically neoliberal for many groupings within the SPD; since Brown's foreign and European policy agenda also combines social democratic values with neoliberal economic tenets, the existence of a grand German coalition combining the SPD and CDU/CSU apparently provides conditions more favourable than those which confronted Blair. However, Brown's reformist agenda in the EU and the foreign policy emphasis on 'global problems' are more likely to exacerbate rifts within the German government than to encounter its united approbation. More fundamentally, although the two governments may find that some of their goals overlap, there is little consensus between them over their *core* priorities or preferred mode of realising them. This is illustrated by the way that Brown prioritises foreign over European policy, and by his likely predilection for going it alone.

Nor is Brown likely to prove malleable, even in his early days. This is in contrast to his uninitiated predecessor who seemed at once flummoxed and ideologically aspirant during the process of EU Treaty change at Amsterdam in 1997. Indeed, Brown's noted faith in the validity of his own agenda—coupled with his unwillingness to engage in constructive debate with his EU partners, let alone delegate power—has made him a difficult presence in Council negotiations. He appears unwilling to play the 'European game', viewing side deals and horse-trading as detrimental to the proper regulation of individual policies rather than as a necessary element of bargaining between 27 states over a range of interconnected issues. In short, although observers have pinpointed in their shared pragmatism a basis of cooperation for Brown and Merkel, they forget that the two employ it in pursuit of different agenda.

What is worse, Germany will struggle to identify reliable allies amongst the ranks of British domestic actors that look likely to increase their clout under Brown. A pro-European agenda would, for example, find little support amongst the Conservatives and the British public. Potential allies, like the SNP, are unlikely to enjoy a *formalised* or *regular* influence on British policy.

Nevertheless, even if Brown appears unlikely to shift his core ideas, and thus rules himself out as a steady partner for Germany's grand coalition, the German government can still influence the choice of the channels through which Brown pursues his priorities—and it is important to recall that the German government continues to view the mode of international action taken (especially inside the EU) as more than just a tool for the realisation of other priorities. The German government needs to show that those forms of international cooperation to which it is committed ideologically also have a practical utility. In this, it can build on those points where Brown has already shown an interest in cooperation. In the case of the EU, this includes internal security cooperation, the

Lisbon Agenda, and the reduction of European bureaucracy. It can also strengthen those processes by which the UK is already bound—in the EU, for example, many key policy areas and reforms have been ‘pre-programmed’ by the European Council and Commission.

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